

The
Death of
Asobo-
NtSi[☆]



Mbuh Tenu Mbuh

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Preface

This novel is reworked from a play manuscript, thanks to the advice from Professor Mark W. Delancey when, about a decade ago, we were sipping coffee at lunchtime at a regular spot in Columbia, SC. After serving as a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at Trident Technical College, Charleston, SC., I had requested for an extension which permitted me to move to Allen University, Columbia, SC., in the Fall where I especially wanted to experience academic life in a predominantly minority institution. At Trident Tech I taught a course on Minority Literatures, in which I included Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a 'minority' text as far as global ideological positioning was concerned. In the meantime, I was introduced to (among others) the landmarks of America's shameful past, after which I realised the dignity of my own past that needed to be celebrated. There was a remarkable parallel, which I pointed out to my students, between Achebe's vision and that of the African American artist, in their attempt to rework the past against the Western canon. When I arrived Allen University, I benefited from a strain of institutionalised 'ignorance' in some of the students that had been fed by a scripted Tarzan politics of the 'primitive'. As such, while a colleague at Trident Tech was surprised to learn that we have a Supreme Court and Judges in Cameroon (she thought it was a unique American institution!), my students at Allen wanted to know if in Africa I encountered lions, tigers, and monkeys along the village paths (they too could not imagine an urban Africa with Western props). Even in the year 2000 when presidential candidates were shouting each other deaf in favour of school reforms, time seemed to have stood still in the pedagogy of the American child as far as the evolution of the African race from a primitive slate was concerned.

For, in South Carolina where the first Blacks from Africa were supposed to have landed, the Blackman's historical image, as far as I gathered, was still frozen as Precambrian fossils to 'civilised' minds. Sweet Boone Home is, happily, a tourist paradise today that disguises even the slave cabins that are still in place, especially when it was selected by Mel Gibson as the site for the bloody reconstruction of a national manhood. Then the stone Memorial at Sullivan's Island serves a therapeutic purpose within a Dream imagination. And the African village where I saw pigs and chickens all over the yard

seemed an attempt to recreate the past beyond Disneyland fantasies. America might have hurt my dispersed ancestry, but she also had the courage to acknowledge the evil of that extensive moment so that we can understand the poet who sings of ‘a Rock, a River, a Tree’ as a collective bridge to making amends with a past from which we all emerge with boughs of ‘the dream and the hope’ as individual or collective storylines of the slave narrative. This was the revivalist disposition in which I returned from the US, convinced that Time is a cheat if only we allow it to prey on our construction of the relative moment; and then found myself redrafting the play manuscript, which had been titled ‘The Successor’, into a more elaborate prose.

In comparison, a degree of immorality attends the United Kingdom’s colonial past, especially in Cameroon, where a pail of Pilate’s water seems to have vindicated the colonial master’s indifference to the aftermath of decolonisation. What we have today is an area with a well formatted past that hardly implicates the ‘master’ as per his own accounts. The scars of colonial administration are very evident today in almost every context, and most conflicts are a spill-over. More particularly, within the context of this novel, the violation of indigenous cultures is still to be recognised as such and rehabilitated. But it does not suffice to resort to the blame game since it always takes two to tango in the restoration business. I am almost obsessed with a cultural re-evaluation that privileges the home front, and consequently relies on local indicators.

Before the coffee-sipping discussion over my manuscript, a couple more years back, and during a meeting between students and the traditional core of my village, I gave a talk on the suspicious partnership between traditional mores and Christian dogmatism. I had just begun a protracted postgraduate program at the then University of Yaoundé, and was then experiencing the initial waves of spiritual reassessment. At the end of my presentation in which I highlighted the similarities between Christian liturgy and traditional ritual wherein the one simply preys on the energies of the other in order to sustain its hegemonic politics (note the disparity in the casing of ‘tradition’ and ‘Christian’ above), I suggested that the Fon of the village should stop attending church services on Sundays, since continuous attendance would clash with his traditional duties. Of

course, this did not go down well with some of the elders who were communicants of (in the case of my village) a retarding Protestantism, and some of them were heard advising against such talks in future. The new form of slavery which the Church enacts today in Africa is, unfortunately, willed by the meekly slave!

Interestingly, the connivance between European missionaries and colonial administrators (especially the British) had refashioned traditional authority in what is now the North West Region of Cameroon not by discriminating between Caesar and God but by ensnaring the potency of traditional leadership into a crippled appendage to 'higher' authority. Traditional institutions collapsed in a strategy that replaced the limited 'world' of the native with universal essences which, to say the least, confused and abrogated native cosmology. The previous eight-day week, thirteen-moon lunar calendar for example was substituted by the Gregorian version; but no one confessed to the duplicity between Caesar and the Pope personified by Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus whether as head of the Roman Empire or of the Holy See, the same personality exploited for different purposes at a given moment. Asobo-Ntsi personifies the way this spiritual transformation was moving across the globe and staged on a 'civilised' ticket to salvation, only that the converted leaders were condemned to serve the dictates of the Emperor-turned-Pope, Constantine and his successors.

After altering the genre of this work, I finally realised the more discursive ease with which I could explore atavistic experience; an advantage which would certainly have been limited by stage constraints, even as this latter form brings with it an unparalleled sense of immediacy. But I also struggled with the form of the emerging novel, reluctant to engage with an obvious narrativity which the historicised plot imposed on me. The blending of voices was the ultimate compromise within which the past and the present, however we frame them as palpable entities, visit and revisit each other in an interrogatory and exploratory manner. We are therefore in a space of imaginative rehabilitation here, a necessary confluence against the cosiness of a globalising fanfare that determines semantics and its temporality. The seductive strands of what is today aggregated as globalisation make sheep and parrots of those of us from the Western periphery, working under and through a conscious determinism whose arrogance is as suspicious as its immanence is unapologetic and frightening. But it is so only because we have

cultivated a catch-up habit that simply denounces our past and offers us a metamorphosed sequencing of ‘civilised’ ideologies without an organic base. No doubt then that African religious ritual, one can argue, is a subject only suitable for orature and anthropology, whose classroom insights explore a reductive intellectualism without the ‘recognised’ transcendental quality of the Western variants. In this state, it seems to me that we are proud to be mental slaves, and so wriggle and hop to the rhythm of Bob Marley’s ‘awakening’ song without realising the GUILTY verdict that the Rastafarian prophet declares against our weakened consciousness. The mitigating plea as to why this should be so is simply ludicrous in my view especially because we are witnesses to the consciously self-serving contradictions that characterise the Western lens and its discourse through time and space.

Thankfully, I am only continuing what is currently topical at this intersecting moment in Africa’s debatable growth. The distortion of African culture in particular has been a subject of deconstructive energies in recent years, in an enabling attempt to reassemble an eroded past. For me, the demise of Asobo-Ntsi, which can be analogous to that of a European benevolent despot during the earlier century, is typical of the misreading of cultural meaning that characterised colonial administration. A ritual by which the community enabled its quintessential being could very easily and therefore conveniently be demonised in order to enhance colonial ascendancy, and foist all other cultural variants onto its authority. Understandably then, the *ngvouré* ritual could only be transcribed for the interest of the West as ‘sassafras poison’, a misinterpretation that benefitted from an ancestry of ‘black’/‘white’ hierarchising of the falsifying pedagogy. This is part of what we confront today, and as Anglophone Cameroon literature emerges into its own without contest, it is only proper too that we begin to reassert a roots consciousness. Inevitably, this can no longer be as unique as traditionalists will hope for, given the globalising breeze that is formatting cultural awareness. The individual artist definitely determines the manner in which to address this issue, from which the threat of globalisation can be contained and defined in local and idiosyncratic terms. As may be evident here and elsewhere, my way of tackling this is to tell a story by destroying its certainty. Not in a negative sense, though, but by taxing the reader’s expectations of the same. Language itself becomes a difficulty to be recognised,

confronted, and surmounted. In other words, language becomes part of the art in need of deciphering rather than a trough to understanding. This distinction is important because, otherwise, what's there after grasping the basics of the story? In most cases, the story is 'surface' meaning beyond which we envisage a more complex and challenging space, that of amorphous insights rooted in the complexities of a linguistic *denarrativity*. By eclipsing the significance of the story (without despising it) we also check our previous reliance on its narrative frame, one that exhausts itself in the end by 'informing' us. We need to go beyond the informative in order to ensure the retrieval of lost cultural data without surrendering too readily to the temptations of the globalising momentum.

Ironically, however, and as I have already suggested above, Africans in particular are today assisting in the near terminal blotting of the past not only through a slavish reliance on articulating a Received Pronunciation mannerism that makes Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson to be a kindergarten character; but also in accepting the religious certainties that framed and still frame a callous brotherliness. D. H. Lawrence had shocked Western expectations of his 'savage pilgrimage' rehab by reconfiguring an Aztec elixir in *The Plumed Serpent*, and we can understand the antagonism that attends his novel. On the other hand, and without any indication of having been inspired by the vision of the English literary outcast, the Cameroonian Kenjo Jumbam problematises the ideological marriage between the West and its assumed margin by twinning Christian and Nso traditional practices in *The White Man of God* as osmotic. These two novels, distanced in many aspects, are however partners in the renewed interest in the 'primitivism' which Western researchers and explorers had intellectualised as a plausible strategy. Ironically, both educated and uneducated Africans are still surrendering a lot of the continent's cultural vigour to the avowal of just how successfully the West has twisted meaning to its own protective 'rights'.

Partly inspired by Lawrence's iconoclasm, I take exception to the way spiritual meaning (as just one example) is today fathomed through a Western yardstick, with Africans as the lead singers! It is sad to hear Africans attest to the backwardness of their cultural heritage, stigmatising it as partly a flirtation wit idols. Doomed to use alien languages even as customised mediums, we shift position and favour based on Western nomenclatures. The consequent sentencing of our religious views as 'pagan' or 'fetish', together with our

linguistic and cultural worldview as 'savage' or 'primitive', has begotten an embarrassing reliance on the Western perspective that denies the beauty and integrity of our own values. Africanists have produced astounding evidence to this effect, whose only weakness seems to be the lack of financial and political force with which such evidence can rival and challenge the grafted mentality. We have abandoned our ancestral shrines in favour of the constructed version whose history is bloodier than anything we can imagine before contact with European civilisation. The church of love and forgiveness has become the one arena for gladiatorial feuds, while its leaders and faithful mouth monotonous abstractions as the righteous way to affirming their respective positions. It is apparent too, today, that some Africans are exploiting the double standards of Christianity to conceal untoward instincts and consequently assume holier than thou poses. Whatever the case, the bellicose nature of relationships between Christian denominations is one clear reason why their teachings should be viewed as schematic and therefore with considerable suspicion.

From such resistance, it is clear that there is a cultural gap in Africa's march into the twenty-first century. While I do not intend to address the nature of this split here, it is important to highlight just one of its consequences, namely, the transformation of the African intellectual in particular into a confused cultural Mullato who has surrendered his past into mere intellectual data. Unable to resist the white man's initial onslaught that has been duly recorded in creative, critical, and discursive works, we have again been unable to visualize development ever since the initial contact with the West beyond a catch-up momentum. The cultural base of Christianity, for instance, which had been hijacked by Rome's rehearsed strategy to globalise its frontiers, is today being Africanised in the name of inculturation. Even as Egyptologists threaten the future of Christianity today by unearthing 'unorthodox' data, Africans are still overwhelmed by the illusion of the alien faith and cling to it with a passion that is confounding. So they abandon their shrines and even destroy them in some cases, and construct huge, intimidating churches as an alternative that imposes itself as the only way to God. And this is grossly unfortunate. The acculturative varieties of inculturation bespeak of the same fate-as-faith, where Africans in particular are condemned to fantasise over the prospects of Christian fear as they do over transitions in cultural matter. In other words, the

intimidatory pedagogy and theology which colonial education and European missionaries introduced in Africa has today been inherited by neoliberal benefactors in a way that condemns the continent to the receiving end of burnt-out initiatives. Until we realise this displacement, and accept the fact that there was nothing wrong with our pre-‘civilisation’ transcendental values, and that paganism is a defining strategy of the West meant to install fear in every non-European/Western household, we shall always struggle with alien definitions of our cosmos and consequently remain collateral partners in a world that is defined by two terms: relativity and greed.

It is part of my concern over this confusion that this novel tackles the past as a mirror to the present. Even here, in this mediation, there is a problem: how far back for instance, can I claw into the past and how effectively can I apply it to contemporary need? For, I am part of that past whose face I conjecture and embrace as evidence of my dissolvable presence. So yes, we can adapt in the healthy hope of moving forward, and do so by ‘editing’ our cultural outlook whenever necessary. But to move forward by forsaking our past and referring to it only as a formality in remedial existence, is to doom posterity to the treachery of alien winds that have mastered the terrain of domination by reinventing horror as a strategic, expedient logic.

Yaoundé, January 5, 2011.

The Muse

It was the email which he received on Empire Day from the archivist at the British Council that provoked the pain. Without probably intending to do so consciously, it scrubbed his memory plates and revived his dulled instincts from the lethargy of casual acknowledgements and into a kind of anthropological alertness. A week before, at the Council, the head of the History and Documentation Department had impressed his audience with a speech about mutations to the 'day' being anticipated then, and pointed out that 'exigencies of the time made it imperative for perceptive revaluations consequent upon the fact that political correctness appears to have won the day and the Day was re-badged since 1958'. Listening to him and taking down notes while pausing amidst muted applause – following a dry joke – to sip his coffee, Mbangnilun Tella'a concluded that a day, like a name, retains its original sting irrespective of the gloss that it gains through strategy.

All of a sudden, as if he were waking from a very long dream, the fallowed years rolled back neglect to the very edge of living memory. And seeing the exposed plain, he knew he could sleep no more until the witches of indolence were slain and he wiped the crimson blotch off the adulterated past, scratched his ancestral patch to the tip of the taproot, and unveiled the mysteries of his cultural being. He had read a few Jesus apologists grafting their milky fraternity on alien spaces for supremacy; diagnosed in a rascally manner their aggregated cultural re-visitings toward the last days, and although he no longer walked in the brightened light of a Jesus-mystery, he still found the cultural revolution inspiring enough: from his standpoint, that is. So the following day he clattered the keyboard in the University computer room requesting specific information about his people from the head of Archives at the Council.

He glanced at the email again as if to confirm his doubts and sudden enthusiasm. The sheet of paper which he had pleaded with a grumbling secretary to print for him against claims that the patron would be mad if he saw her doing such senseless charity stared back like a slap of silence.

'Sorry, Sir,' it announced in habitual humility even when stabbing, 'but our records hold no such data about the Bapinyis of

the Bamenda Division. However, I'll be glad to oblige you if you can suggest an alternative search subject'.

And lots of contact details totalised as evidence of civilized grooming. He smiled stiffly and would have loved to groan, but that would have been self-betrayal. His nails were still stiff and he was ready to scratch the earth for meaning.

And he imagined the archivist's red pen across his name, already, condemning his ancestry as material for the shredder; and heard what was not uttered in those sweet, complying lines, namely that as long as the victor determines material for history books, sifts through this and edits every piece of nuisance, there was just no way, till the end of time, if ever and whenever, that the story of the defeated would be subject for civilized, conquering minds. Just as a Black Christ inroad into Western consciousness, he reflected, was a militant blunder against the canon that served no one's interest, least of all the Black man's, as per Western evaluation, it would be foolhardy to contemplate a postcolonial emissary at the gates of the High Commission with a petition about restitution and all the other sentimental attachments to a ruined memory, for onward transmission to N° 10 Downing Street. Empire Day still hailed a vision, if disguised by the one and despised by the other.

And History was more than a desire to know; it was also the determination and ability to phase out the knowable either as non-existent or as classified stuff too sensitive for contemporary, reviving minds, sniffing unnecessary headaches. So we tend to flirt with alibis.

Sitting in the compressed space of his chambre moderne, student mood, these thoughts of me and them, the seer and the seen, crashed through his mind, and he finally wondered, remembering as if for the first time, if all that mind-searching to glimpse into ancestral hideouts had been a mist of the imagination only, that nothing ever happened that was not recorded by the recorder? Evidently, 1924 was now the fossilised path of British colonial manhood in the Bamenda Division, only more exotic than the moment of Vandals crossing the Channel in crude boats to remap the Celtic landmarks! Had his lecturer not said, during the Crossroads Lecture Series, that there was power in naming, the code, the coded, and the encoder, encoding? The name-giver controls the named either into subjugation or as challenge to obsolete contentions, the Don had avowed to approving nods. And although the students had been itching to probe more into

the contested space of Alahweka where they were conscripted celebrants to kilned emotions, they also knew when and why never to attempt crossing the ideological Rubicon. The wound heals faster if left unscratched, the Don would have said habitually before adding with crafty resignation: 'It's for you to search your pilgrim soul and determine your manner of alignment'.

And was he then to stoop to the single sentence from the Council pigeonhole, like a crucifix to his past, and concede to a cultural demise and historical wrong?

Transition

But no one remembered how it was, except the old man in need of a host in whose bosom to escape ... and rest from the burden of memory.

When he opened his mouth, memory troighed the future, for he was pregnant with the unknown. He had been a custodian of the word-of-mouth lore until changes came that made him blink, confounded his universe and almost cut his tongue in their rude denunciations...

Eventually, in the midst of the madness, a holiday maker's vagrant horizons coiled unannounced around the Sanyere slope and proved an astrologer's crystal ball in primitive heritage; an anthropologist's paradise where oral lore had to be transcribed for posterity...

And he remembered what had always been remembered: the paths had opened before sturdy feet refusing rest, crushing stumps and twigs and spear-grass across the twisted surfaces; and where the thicket had been stubborn, inscrutable in aboriginal conspiracy, flames had been summoned, faithful pal to the pathfinder, clashed from shiny bankih and tinder. Otherwise, during rains, as the seasons gave them life and wore them out with too much of life and too much of loss, and through boggy traps, a detour proved the only short way across the violent seasons of furious dread, bloody and tearful: through mountain depths, where like a hidden navel the patchy settlements were walled-in by hanging cliffs whose collective face snarled a stiff note of no welcome. They had moved off after a while, ever so restive and needy, against the bloody clashes and wails, and scattered fraternity reassembled at some point ahead, forever resolute. The toll was heavy, indeed, inevitable deaths, retreat, rebellion, but they forged on, staring death in the face and refusing to surrender.

So even Mbvouh, which was forever the navel of the world where wandering footsteps intersected – long, long before Father John the Road came with his long nose and even longer sense, pledging the friendship of his God by vowing to break Konrad's

slave chain; a shield of kneaded mountain ranges against aggressive conquerors; and where the labouring mother could breathe in peace and hear the new cry that tore through the forest quiet, enshrining its name: even so, it was only a temporary womb where the shoot sprouted in transit. Crossroads in tribal migration, the peaky depth dared even the strongest into its paths, but was merciful to the desperate and kind-hearted who gathered in hamlets and consolidated energies and in the morning either followed the river into the uncreated forest and toward the coast or traced the higher contours out of the forested world for the grassfields. That was when Tenghehfeng with stubborn, restless feet, guarding his wearied charge and slashing every thicket that blocked his way, visible or invisible, human or fauna, thought rest was too much of a luxury to indulge. But Tad was another tempting crossroads, only too exposed, and his people cried: here we stay, if you must go on, and he heard their cries. But only for a while because a few seasons after, contingency devised another path for his travails, and sleepy-eyed and cursing, he again led his people across the daring hills and through the murky seasons. Those who refused to leave promised and were promised seasonal rituals, wherever they should settle.

And in the main, encountering and overcoming resistance whenever enticement failed through mountain and savannah, they emerged at last from the forested pall, to breathe again like a shoot in the morning ray. And they were merging up too, recognising their tongue and remembering their stories, but also learning to learn and accept what they did not know the day before from various corners of their world, strange names and faces and titles, and after fifty dry seasons of slaving toil, of brief encampments and restless anxieties of their restless spirit, Tenghehfeng at last shook his burden off his slouching shoulder with a sigh, and peered into the nook of a hilly trickle for where to lay the head and trough a drink.

‘Here we stay then,’ he declared, planting the withering fig into earth, and Qwang slipped into the pool and clung to the sodden earth.

Sturdy lineage, recalled, that braved dark horizons and forged a future which now dangled on Asobo-Ntsi’s stern tongue, he concluded.

Chapter One

And gathering clouds often bring rain, Tella'a recalled from elementary geography as practical intro to his immersion into wild mysteries; but they can also portend uncertainties of the past and of the future in one feathery whiff. Heavy burdens of prophecy uncoded, and the weary tongue transformed into a tentative nip must search the groves of peace where Qwang procreated between the shadow of night and the shadow of day and on the fluffy threshold of rain and sun, and he, Tella'a, the writing pad, learning again how to listen and never forget.

And so that wet August evening, his pilgrimage, when he clung to the slopes of Sanyere and negotiated his way along the slippery and winding path, feeling the squish of rotten leaves underfoot, against exposed root and stump, toward the old man's abode, a trough into the past from where to see the future...

Shadows of the evening were already spreading their dark wings like invisible haze into the corners of the day, and the fowls flapped their wings in short flights, skipping from one branch to the next, to roost. Eventually the wooden or bamboo doors creaked to a latched security and habitual silence descended on the land. Even the storyteller could not break the drowsy spell and yawned a last submissive yawn for the day. One after another the lights went out together with the whispery voices: all except the old man's whose strength was suspended on a string of memory. Although he was not expecting the green twig now requesting to tickle his pain, he was still complying, his sigh of reprieve before earthly expiration.

And so listening and jotting even without doing so, while feeding on lobes of kolanut from a tray of straw, the phases of Time revolted in an instance of psycho-cultural interrogation, self-assertive, patching bits of knowledge against the violating moment. And he heard the Song of Memory, to those who may yet sing after the voice of the dawn cock...

And so this was the song of Memory and how she, slippery lady without age, rose on a thin beam of the sickle day and stretched from knotty roots beyond the timeless bounds, to cast a cold spell on

the beating hearts, surging across frontiers; hearts that wandered for space and shade, for where to lay their God, and sleep and procreate.

Ndiyzé stirred the glowing coals again and sighed with satisfaction as the flame leapt from the hearth and licked his face with its drowsy warmth. He was in a half crouch, adjusting the main log to make sure its hanging face caught the flames that leapt from the tinder of dried fibre. He fell back in his reclining bamboo chair a few steps away from the hearth, and stretched out with a relaxing yawn, happy. The chair had been specially made by Njigmô following his instructions, so that he could rest his back in a comfortable half-sitting, half-lying position and listen to the crawling insects in his back, as he often said, when recommending his friend's handiwork, and recalling at such moments the seasons which that very back had ferried for his family and for Nyen, eyes closed, in the intimate enclosure of his ntang.

The mud walls gave him security and peace, and he felt same for his four wives and six grown-up sons, now on their own hills with their wives as they saw fit, and why should a man grumble if he could recline in his favourite place and recall his life without a shadow of regret, and look ahead without a shadow of fear, prior of the Gods?

But tonight he was worried; even the wisdom of roughly seventy dry seasons, and of a happy man in his home, could not save him from such a state. As second in command in Nyen he had the misfortune of sharing the Fon's own misfortunes even before anyone else in the village ever heard them whispered. That was the law of the land and Asobo-Ntsi knew what it meant not to obey the law set down in oath by his forefathers at the crossroads of time. There was no particular time for royal messengers to knock on Ndiyzé's door and he was also used to that, anticipating what it was his fate to expect. And tonight had been just one of them.

He was almost retiring to bed when he heard the familiar bugle sound from his threshold, repeated as usual after a brief pause.

'If you carry Asobo-Ntsi's fig leaf,' he had called out, almost mechanically, 'then my door has never been closed to you; come in,' he said, lifting the latch from inside. His wives had been through with their daily responsibilities for him and being the farming season, Ndiyzé did not expect any of his sons to come and talk away the

evening with him, sucking wine; he himself had important family engagements the following day and was already preparing for an early rest.

Ndindoh stooped into the hut and stood to one side of the door.

‘Asobo-Ntsi sends greetings to Ndiyzé,’ he began.

Ndiyzé made a gesture of impatience with his hand, slightly shutting the door with a wedge specially shaped from a bamboo stump.

‘Do not tell me that the warriors of Tipah are approaching the Ngamncho hills again,’ he said and waved Ndindoh to a stool. ‘I know Asobo-Ntsi can only send me greetings and problems. Still I thank you for the greetings although I am still to see the eggs from the serpent’s womb. But you must first warm the cold off your hands before giving me the bundle of misfortunes.’

He said this laughing; he was always laughing in his soft-spoken tone even when people expected him to be cursing. It was said that his mother was laughing too when he came out with a fig leaf in his weak hand, and so he was always surprised to see men express anger when a laugh could make everybody happy. But this time though, he failed to soften the stiff look of duty that was engraved on Ndindoh’s face like a mask. Often the royal messenger would linger in his haste, rub his hands against the enticing flames, swallow something and gulp down a couple of cow horns to wash down the food before taking his leave, blinking with contentment.

‘I thank Ndiyzé,’ he said, ‘but I must see all of Ikum-Samba and report back to Asobo-Ntsi before he takes his evening shower’.

‘I see,’ the old man said gravely, nodding. He understood the unmistakable voice of duty that could not be derailed even by a goddess’ smile and he pitied the younger man who was carrying on a tradition that he too was burdened to respect. ‘So how near is Tipah, if we are not yet surrounded?’

‘I do not yet know, Ndiyzé,’ the messenger said hesitantly, ‘and I doubt if it is Tipah. But Asobo-Ntsi wants you to be in the palace before the first fowl descends from the pear tree in your yard’.

Ndiyzé paused in thought, already used to the nagging intrusion of royal summons, and when he spoke it was with the voice of a child complaining about a task that cannot however be avoided.

‘Asobo-Ntsi knows that my mother’s people will be visiting

me tomorrow’.

Ndindoh shrugged inwardly; his concern was the rounds he was still to make in every sub-palace that night, skirting slippery hills and crossing thin bridges with only a lurid bamboo torch as companion. The flames were often blown out by the winds of the departing season, and he had to stumble on his way to the next Kingmaker’s palace before setting flame to the bundle again. If he could help it, no ordinary eye was supposed to see him on his nocturnal trip even though he was not Kwi’for.

‘But did he tell you why I must only stand like this and be in the palace before cockcrow?’

‘No, but I am sure he will explain the matter to you immediately he sees you’. Ndindoh was impatient; but that was his problem, Ndiyzé had his too.

‘Like he always does,’ he said to himself half-grudgingly. Then he turned to the messenger again: ‘Are there any visitors coming?’ Ndiyzé’s curiosity, once roused, was almost childish and Ndindoh through years of interaction with the man could not conceal his growing impatience with the very voice.

‘Visitors are always expected in the palace, Ndiyzé,’ he said, shifting onto his left leg, and Ndiyzé thought how at that age he was a miracle messenger, swift as a deer; ‘but I do not know about tomorrow,’ he said.

‘Oh, I forget that you never know anything,’ and he smiled wryly at Ndindoh, patting the younger man on the shoulder. ‘But since you will not sit down let me see if there is something for your feet’. He stooped into the inner ntang and came out almost immediately with a kolanut and a neatly wrapped bundle.

‘This is for you,’ he said, offering the kolanut to Ndindoh, ‘and this is for Asobo-Ntsi’s pipe’.

‘Thank you,’ Ndindoh said, dexterously splitting the kolanut into two equal halves. He dropped one half together with Asobo-Ntsi’s tobacco into his fibre bag and again broke the other half into smaller lobes before offering them to Ndiyzé.

‘What do I take back to Asobo-Ntsi?’ Ndindoh said after a loud crackle in his mouth.

‘Tobacco of course!’ Ndiyzé said with fake seriousness. ‘I personally fermented it on the Qwang rock on my stone out of public view’.

‘Yes, but what about Asobo-Ntsi’s message’.

‘Tell him I will welcome my mother’s people tomorrow and that I will be in the palace tomorrow’. His voice was now grave with emotion and Ndindoh almost pitied him in his own inability to oppose Asobo-Ntsi’s will.

Long after Ndindoh had rushed off into the dripping night, Ndiyzé was still standing on the same spot mechanically chewing at a regular rhythm, and wondering what Asobo-Ntsi wanted this time. This was the planting season and the man – indeed still a boy, to think of it! – will not allow people go about their own tasks. It was true that palace business was the business of everyone, at any time, but then a man too must be a man in his own homestead. This was the second time he was being summoned to the palace in five days and how was he to ensure a normal harvest if he cannot properly supervise the final stage of the work? O, how time passed and ferried away its blessings! Where was Piegha and Awa’apare to rescue the land from this confusion just beginning to brew? There had been trouble in the past but in the end it was all managed with a sanity that begat posterity and no one worried if he forgot to latch the door at night.

A cold gush of wind brought him back to his ntang; he had strayed beyond it in his thoughts, like a desperate totem abroad, seeking base. He closed the bamboo door gently, secured the latch in place and returned to his seat. But his thoughts refused to recline with his body into the familiar hardness of the chair. He was too conscious to relax, and he was worried too. It was Asobo-Ntsi’s added behaviour of late: the Fon, young as he was, was allowing the land to wear him out. It was as if he was living for the land, even forgetting the royal bed! Ndiyzé had been summoned to the Palace several times by the Mafor to bring order into the royal bedroom.

He listened to his thoughts and struggled to pin them down and finally concluded that if his own family problems have not yet sent him to meet his ancestors, Asobo-Ntsi would soon do that. So he decided to send word to his first son to attend to his mother’s people while he stepped out to discuss Nyen business with Asobo-Ntsi. His son too should begin to know that a man’s plans stood firm only as long as the royal breeze does not blow his way.

The drizzle had long ceased and silence descended on the night. Only echoes of an owl's distant hooting reached Ndiyzé's ears and he turned in a drowsy reluctance. But he too was aware of it only from a distance, dosing off in fits. The fire too was dying out, each glowing coal succeeded by an ashy mould and soon the whole room was engulfed in the sombre atmosphere of dying sparkles.

The path opened like a stubborn web, reluctant to open and too eager to close again after each step; and completely drenched by the heavy dew, Ndechi fought his way through the entanglement using both his hands and his machete. Once or twice he had to curse because a blade of grass pierced his eye. If not of the royal summons a man will not go tapping even before the first cockcrow. He thought of shifting his anger onto the head of Ndiyzé, poor man, but knew better: even Mengoua and its tricky climb, irrespective of season, would not deter Asobo-Nsti from pushing a cripple up its slopes if he set his mind to picking sacred leaves at the peak for his ritual. Just the distance from his compound to his raffia bushes was work enough, not to talk of the rain of two nights ago that swept the bridges away, uprooting trees and causing the entanglements along the overgrown path. From the intensity of the first rains, some moons back, Ndechi had warned that Nyen was going to hear many wailings. Fortunately, Kwi'for had heeded his fears and the major bridges had been reinforced while rituals were performed at troublesome points to appease the river god.

As he emerged from the thicket into the farmed area, Ndechi swore to himself that he was going to be late for the meeting. Asobo-Ntsi was suddenly treating them like a bunch of women, and to imagine that he was a mere child who only yesterday could not wipe his own nose in clan matters and depended on them! And now if one of his queens becomes stubborn at night the next morning Ikum-Samba must be summoned to the palace to look into some delicate matter affecting the land. What did he take them for? It was because they too had given in and made him believe that they exist and are important only for his moody summons. But men must learn to behave like men or be taken for women! He will go to the palace, Ndechi vowed again to himself, pushing aside a bunch of shrubs that

blocked his way, but he will not be there before the first fowl drops off the pear tree in his compound. Asobo-Ntsi must also learn to wait.

He reached his compound when the sun was already throwing long shadows across the yard. Nkeng, his third wife, was sweeping the front of her hut. She was whistling a bridal tone and wriggling her waist to rhythm and did not notice her husband come up behind her. She jumped away in fright, with a stifled shriek, when his presence brushed her, but quickly recollected herself.

‘What is there to hold my stomach with?’ Ndechi spat out.

‘Is that a new way to greet?’ Nkeng retorted. Unlike his other wives, she was defiant and took pleasure in challenging his authority. ‘Ama’a has already passed on his way to the palace’. And she wriggled her waist anew, and away, ignoring him.

The children had paused in their activity, and gathered around their father with expectant looks but were disappointed when the usual bulge from his raffia bag was not visible and the bag slung from Ndechi’s shoulder like an old piece of fibre skirt. Usually, he will tarry on his way back and fetch a handful of atsoh for his children, only to use this as bribe to know what his wives had been saying about him the previous evening. ‘Our mother said’ became the traditional prelude to a revelation that ended with the man devising new strategies against his wives. Even when the children lied or flattered him in order to have more, he still indulged them, giving them a bit of himself that was rare to offer, and they laughed, running off.

Ndechi sighed and turned away. Once Nkeng was in the mood of teasing him there was nothing he could do than treat her like one of his naughty kids. Instead of going into his house he turned toward the house of Wondzi, his second wife. She was nursing and Ndechi knew that even if they were still preparing the morning meal, as he gathered from the sound of the pestle reaching him, the baby’s basket was always the refuge for the desperate traveller.

His mother-in-law was peeling the heat-browned bananas into the mortar and his wife’s first daughter, Ateh, was perched at the head of the mortar stylishly sitting to one side of the mortar, her long legs stretched out in a neat tangle, and guiding the pestle over the bananas, as they fell, in gliding blows.

'You are early today,' his mother-in-law greeted, briefly looking up.

Ndechi growled an answer. He was moody suddenly, and his in-law's better judgement told her that silence was the best attitude against the man who, otherwise, was very chatty with her especially when his trap offered him additional reason to boast of himself as the best in-law in all of Nyen. But now he will stumble over himself and look for someone to lay his anger on and any human sound provided the needed clue. If only he could learn like other men to stay in his house once he was disturbed. She had complained to her daughter about the unpredictable moods of their husband, and she had laughed.

'He is our first child still growing up, and unpredictable, and we know it,' she confessed. 'He behaves like a lone twin as if he expected us to become his mother too'. And she had laughed again with the confidence of one who knew and loved what she had.

Ndechi went round the room in search of something that was not there and made for the door again. Once hungry he often evoked the memory of his first wife, struck down by thunder on her way from the farm four rainy seasons ago. That was a woman who knew what a man's stomach needed, and made sure there was always some little distraction for him while she prepared elaborately.

'We will need some oil and meat for the sauce,' Wondzi called after him.

He paused but did not turn and then hastened away.

'What is wrong with him?' Maa said half amused.

'Why did you not ask him when he was here?'

'Is he my husband?' mother said to daughter, laughing.

Ndechi rinsed his feet into the wooden manger under the pear tree where the fowls and pigs came for water especially in the dry season. After brushing off bits of dew-glued grass from his body and ruffling his scanty hair, he went into his ntang and brought down the keg of palm oil from the lower ceiling. With a huge wooden spoon he hewed out a substantial quantity to last the women two markets. But he also knew they would spend the whole day roasting cocoyams and potatoes to be dipped generously into the oil as if he still had reliable

relations in Tewirikum. Then he unhooked four or five strands of meat neatly sliced and allowed to smoke gradually over the hearth. He then packed everything in his food basket and placed it outside by the door. He too took delight in playing games with the women even when he appeared stern: he would sneak away, deaf to their supplications, knowing how they would rain curses on him immediately his door closed behind him with an arrogant slam, for not providing them with what they desired.

Nkeng and the little children were busy feeding the fowls, throwing handfuls of corn to the chuckling flock. She was his bride and her period of emerging womanhood also implied that she engage in such trivialities and attract all the children who were also willing to kill themselves for her; and as Ndechi watched her from behind he felt the lump in his chest melt away and even his hunger was suddenly a distant counterpart to his thoughts. She was already through with her period of taking care of Wondzi, and only took care now, of the baby's bath all day. She had to do it, Ndechi reflected with a rascally smile, to initiate her hands into the delicate business as her own stomach was swelling perceptibly. He had wasted no time in making her beautiful, and his in-laws offered him kolanut with added respect, whenever they met at Mitanyen.

Amongst the children and feeding the fowls, Nkeng forgot everything, and her tickling laughter rang out with an oily glow that brought a smile to Ndechi's face as he stooped back into his house. The children were bias and excited, trying to ensure that their particular chicken fed the most. Some of the fowls had wooden blindfolds fitted to their beaks so that they do not peck out the corn shoots. But Menyi had picked up a quarrel with Awangwi, and Nkeng had to intervene.

'But he was singing my song,' Menyi said with blood in her eyes.

'It is a lie!' Awangwi protested; 'I was singing it differently'.

Nkeng was forced to offer Menyi a new song with the added promise to take her alone to the stream when she went for her evening bath.

Chapter Two

The sound had died out, the voice had gone beyond human sound, and once more the night felt human, cold and heavy with night sounds. Time was a stubborn footpath that refused to be beaten off the surface of things, and raised its head always in a new assertive coil that spared no one. And Tella'a listened to the mystic words and their eternal echo that had slipped through the old man's lips, at times with the power of incantation, now trembling in his own heart. And he waited for the trail to be picked up again after the intermittent rest, the husky sounds coming from the chest of the old one like the returning season's breeze.

The palace was a cluster of thatched houses and huts constructed in a semi-circle on a gentle slope that dissolved into the thick woods of the Qwang plain. The entrance was broad enough to allow the Fon's entourage comfortable passage during the annual *iléré* dance. Two huge poles decorated with cowries and carvings formed the main gateway where, on important occasions the palace guards were posted, sporting their caps with broken fez or loose hem, a rare gift from Nwuoupang.

The inner courtyard was assuming a formal appearance as the elders came in one after the other and sat in a semi-circle according to their ranks, facing the royal stool in central position to which each elder bowed and cup-clapped, uttering *Tsa-apifor!* before taking his place and then greeted his peer in characteristic manner. A mighty elephant tusk lay at the foot of the royal stool and although Ama'a and Ndechi were chatting light-heartedly over what happens to the remains of royal booty whenever Asobo-Ntsi went mad after tax defaulters for Nwuoupang, the atmosphere was still tense with a solemn suspense.

There was sudden silence as the side door creaked and Ndiyzé came out from the inner court. The others looked up expectantly, but Ndiyzé, apparently enjoying the momentary confusion, passed on without a word and unhooked his stool from a peg on the rear court wall, and sat himself next to the royal stool.

With deliberate moodiness he opened his tiger skin bag and brought out his snuff container, a hollowed stump polished into a fine ball with a carved cork to fit. He tapped the cork even more deliberately as if listening for a sound of approval from within and began to gently turn it loose. The other notables stared at him and then at each other in exasperation, silenced by their collective impotence against Asobo-Ntsi.

‘What is the meaning of all this, Ndiyzé,’ Ndechi burst out at last, furious, ‘if you say I complain too much?’ His breathing was already quickening and there was a glint in his eyes as he looked around at the rest of the company. ‘The Fon summons us to the palace and we leave our homes without even cutting off the bitter spittle rising from our bellies. The sun is almost walking straight now and there is still no word from the lion himself!’ His tone was softening as he continued. ‘The only thing we know is that he had invited Ndiyzé straight into his private chambers and now the man comes out and has suddenly lost his power of speech. Again I ask, what is the meaning of all this?’

Ndechi was always known to speak his mind, and once his fury was over he was as calm and harmless as a larva. The other notables could hardly offer an opinion; the Fon was forever present even in the shadow of his stool and very few would dare to be as bold as Ndechi.

‘If someone were needed to run an errand to Tipah,’ Ndechi went on as if to himself, grumbling, ‘Tsa-apifor will think of me at that time; but when it comes to sharing grain, the partridges must be sent out of the house in order to feed the chickens’.

But it seemed no one was listening to him; when it came to criticising Asobo-Ntsi, they always knew what not to say, and the best response to Ndechi was to pretend deafness.

But Wamuwure looked around at the bowed heads and decided that his friend was not mad.

‘Is Ndiyzé here?’ he ventured, clearing his throat.

‘I’m here, Ndesoh’.

‘I think Ndechi is right to speak his mind the way he just did. You came in last, but did not think it necessary to recognize those of us who arrived a little earlier and throw even a greeting at us’.

‘The Fon should know that we are men with people behind us too,’ Ndechi said, invigorated, fuming anew like raffia wine unable

to be constrained in a calabash once the container has been tipped.

Ndiyzé looked up casually.

‘I hope you will tell him that when he comes in, Ndechi,’ he said.

Ndechi glared at him, momentarily forgetting hierarchy.

‘Is that the greetings he asked you to give us?’ he said; ‘then go back and tell him we have heard and would like to know if we can now return to our homes and have something to chew?’

‘And drink too, Ndechi,’ Ndenkaa added; ‘I am dying of thirst’.

As deliberate as ever, Ndiyzé produced a huge kolanut pod already cracked from his bag and passed it around before tipping the snuff into the palm of his left hand.

‘Was Ndiyzé waiting for us to carry wine to his compound before having what was ours?’ Ndentim said, serving himself.

Ndiyzé was about to answer at the same time that a sneeze threatened him. He pinched his nose with his thumb and index finger, stifling it.

‘Ahhhh...!’ he yawned with satisfaction before turning to the group. ‘You all grumble like women not satisfied with their share of meat from the husband. The Fon has not received us; he has not fed us; and he has not given us kola and wine. What have you become! ... Babies?’

‘What did you expect from us, Ndiyzé?’ Ndechi challenged. ‘The only way to keep the mouth shut is to give it something to chew’.

‘Then be ready to chew all of what Asobo-Ntsi will offer you’.

‘What is wrong with you today, Ndiyzé?’ Ndenkaa barked out. ‘If something is wrong, then tell us!’

‘Is something wrong again?’ Ndesoh said, unable to hide his fear. During the last Council meeting the Fon specifically rebuked him for poorly handling a boundary dispute with Tipah as if he had forgotten that Nwuoupang was on the side of Tipah.

Ndiyzé was enjoying himself. He loved nothing during such gatherings more than the look of a frightened dog, its tail between the hind legs, creeping over the faces of the notables who only a moment ago wanted to talk like men.

‘I do not know,’ he said. ‘I am not the Fon; Asobo-Ntsi

speaks for himself, and you know that. But no one can blame Ndiyzé now for not giving you something to chew. That should keep your mouths busy’.

Ndechi now stood up and positioned himself in front of Ndiyzé, a crude look on his face; he will take it no more.

‘What is really wrong with you today, Ndiyzé?’ he hissed between his teeth. ‘You went in there and saw the Fon and also talked with him, so you should let us know what to expect, or if you only had your bellyful of palace wine tell us!’

As he walked back to his stool Ndiyzé finally stirred out of his comic indulgence and regarded all of them with something like elderly understanding.

‘You all say the Fon rules with his claws and teeth, but you are the ones who mislead and encourage him. How do you expect Asobo-Ntsi not to be the lion he is, and rage whenever the demon takes control of him, when you talk like women rivalling one another? You all talk like women on the way to Mitanyen and that is why he always succeeds’.

‘But tell us, Ndiyzé,’ Ndentin said, ‘what is the matter today? Stop talking in riddles. You know we are not women!’

‘I am sorry Ndentin,’ Ndiyzé retorted, ‘I thought I was talking to the notables of Asobo-Ntsi not knowing that they are still babies’.

‘That is an insult Ndiyzé!’ Ndechi said again, getting on his feet. ‘You may be fortunate to meet with the Fon in private and fill your belly while we yawn in the courtyard, but it does not mean you can talk to us like that! Apart from being notables we are still men with full calabashes between our thighs!’

‘Again you are right, Ndechi,’ Ndiyzé said in his usual calm and subdued voice. He had been sent on many royal errands because of his soft tone and the results have always pleased Asobo-Ntsi, and why should he deny the fact? He was an honest man, if there was one in all of Nyen, and even denied himself when it came to that, because of honesty.

But there was a flourish at the main door followed by hypnotic silence in the courtyard. The palace usher appeared at the door with a stern, serene look on his face bearing a jingling spear.

‘The lion of the land!’ he announced in an erect posture. Then he stepped aside and ushered Asobo-Ntsi into the courtyard, preceded by a servant. The latter placed a lion skin on the royal stool

and then withdrew nearer to the usher. Meanwhile the notables scrambled to their feet as Asobo-Ntsi made his appearance and chanted a chorus of 'Mbe-el' simultaneously clapping their cupped hands to rhythm, slightly bowed. Asobo-Ntsi sat down in majestic pride, an almost cynical smile lingering on his face. But he was also uncertain about the men now gathered around him, paying homage. Then two other servants appeared from behind the veiled door and took up positions on either side of the Fon, a few steps behind.

Asobo-Ntsi surveyed the group with undisguised satisfaction and cleared his throat.

'Tsa-apifor!' the notables ejaculated accompanied by masculine ululations in several tones.

'Pienyen-Mechop,' Asobo-Ntsi began, having never learned how to linger into any discussion. 'I am glad that you heeded my midnight call. Only a foolish man sleeps with both eyes closed, when fire threatens his roof. Ndiyzé-we, I salute you again!'

'Tsa-apifor!' Ndiyzé replied. It was his pride to be distinguished in the land especially amongst his peers even if he was not a proud man because of that.

'And I greet Ndesoh' Asobo-Ntsi continued, 'and you Ndenkaa, Ndechi, and Ndentin. Your presence tells me that our land only knows the path that leads ahead'.

He paused a bit, to let his greetings settle in the hearts of his notables, as they again cupped their hands in the form of a trumpet, variously uttering 'Tsaapifor!' or 'Mbe-el'.

'You must have asked yourselves why Ndindoh came out again so soon when I summoned you to the palace not up to one market today to announce our great hunt. No man should sleep and close his eyes when fire threatens his house'.

Then he cast a sharp look at the men gathered before him and intimidated by the power from his royal lips.

'Ndechi,' he called out, 'are you listening to us?'

Ndechi stirred uneasily, 'I am, Mbe-el'

'I am happy to hear that because our first worry concerns you!' There was a sudden unmistakable ruthlessness in his voice now and that was what made Asobo-Ntsi who he was.

'Your family is threatening us!' he declared.

There was incredulous silence, brief and heavy, in which the notables exchanged glances. Ndechi glared at Ndiyzé and then

quickly turned to Asobo-Ntsi, subdued.

'How, Tsa-apifor, how can my family threaten the lion?' He sounded so plaintive Ndiyzé almost laughed.

'I will tell you how,' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'that is why you are here'. He cleared his voice and without waiting for the ceremonial ululation he continued, 'Nwouopang's messenger has been here three times since ilèrè to ask for the remaining tax money from Nyen. It is your family that is causing us headache!' He was almost shouting now. 'You know how much Nwouopang loves our land. But your people want to destroy everything! And I will not have it, not me! Tell them that this Nkap is the day for tax collection and that it is the last day for the season. Anyone of them who still thinks Asobo-Ntsi is a rat shall see what lion I am!'

He paused and gave the group the same threatening look that subjugated them, already in one of his formal rages. He was going to bellow, Ndiyzé knew, like the Qwang fall in Mengang and then get out of the mood as if he had never been angry all his life, smiling. Fortunately for Ndiyzé none of it could come his way; he was only a wet branch used to put out flames, even royal flames, and who has ever heard it said that the hunter mistakes his own dog for the game.

'Is Awa-nkaa amongst us?'

The voice of Asobo-Ntsi brought Ndiyzé out of his own thoughts. He too had to be attentive.

'He is, Tsa-apifor!' Ndenkaa replied, now with the submission of a messenger although it was also his right to sit in council, 'and his ears are in Mbe-e's mouth!'

But he was tense too, unsure of what to expect: With Asobo-Ntsi one was never sure of anything; he was so unpredictable, and even took pride in such a quality because as he once told them a good hunter will never disclose his entire plan to the animal kingdom. That was the problem with Asobo-Ntsi, which Ndiyzé alone seemed to understand and master. He was too proud and confident and openly challenged those who doubted him.

'I thank you again, Ndenkaa,' he said; 'you know that taxes and people are raffia wine and kolanut to Nwouopang. If we must have sufficient tax money to make him happy and give us some of the things he is giving to Tipah, we must also have many people'.

Ndenkaa was already having difficulties breathing; he could vaguely see the direction of Asobo-Ntsi's steps and feared the

outcome.

‘Hardly a night passes without our ears being disturbed by wailings from your house. You still harbour some of those witches whose existence threatens my people! Do you still remember what I did to Ndesooh’s house last season?’

‘How can I forget, Tsa-apifor!’ So this was it, Ndenkaa concluded. He had known all along that Asobo-Ntsi was not going to close his ears to the mournful noise from his quarter. He had even talked to some of the people suspected of involvement, after consultations with his dibias, but they all claimed to be innocent. And now Asobo-Ntsi was coming in and no one knew what to expect. But the Fon was still talking, making no pretence, and only being too frank.

‘Tell your people,’ he was saying, ‘that on the Nghekob following my visit to Ndechi’s house you and your people shall all assemble here to drink of ngvouré. My people must grow. Our protection will be for the man or woman whose herbs ensure this, but immediate destruction will await those whose charms disturb the growth of my people’.

He paused again to let his words have the effect he wanted.

‘Pienyen-Mechop,’ he said in his habitual conclusion, ‘do our hearts think alike?’

‘Mbe-e!’ Ndenkaa cooed in.

‘Our hearts think alike, your highness,’ Ndentin chorused, relieved that for once at a Council session he had not been reprimanded. Asobo-Ntsi’s terror caught a man when he was least prepared for it.

But Asobo-Ntsi frowned; this was not the response he expected. All lips were not in it and that was a bad omen. Ndiyzé of course was not expected to say a thing; it was no secret that he tasted of every pot before Asobo-Ntsi could dish it out to whomever. But two lips had not moved in response to his words.

‘Then Ndechi and Awa-nkaa are not with us,’ he said as if in pain. ‘What objections do you have against us?’

His eyes were on Ndechi who became tentative in his reaction, no longer sure of his words.

‘There is no objection Mbe-e! The only problem is that my people are not the only debtors of Nwuoupang. And most of those who have not paid are the children of Awa-nkaa and Ndentin, Mbe-

e'.

Asobo-Ntsi corked his head to one side and even smiled.

'You are very right, Ndechi,' he said, 'but it is me your people owe, not Nwuoupang. But they also owe more than any other family'. Then he smiled again, 'I do not know whether they are the children of Awa-nkaa or those of Ndentin or even those of the palace. But I know that they are living under your roof and if they do not pay it means you are protecting them not to!'

'Mbe-e is never wrong,' Ndechi said like a fallen hero in a wrestling contest, trying at the same time not to be confused by his anger at Ndentin who was laughing and uttering salutary remarks at Asobo-Ntsi.

'Can I then ask Mbe-e for one more market to collect all the money before your visit,' he implored in a voice that Ndiyzé, listening, thought it could break even the bravest heart, but not that of Asobo-Ntsi.

'You and your people have had too many markets since iléré' he said. 'Be ready with all what you have gathered on past market days and we shall thank you for that'. He was again laughing. 'Just tell them what I will do or will not do if I am happy or not happy with them. Now, Awa-nkaa, what do you have to say?' His voice was already sharp again, commanding.

'Mbe-e knows what I have to say!' Ndenkaa said in exasperation. 'Everybody knows the witches in my house and why they have never been caught each time Ti-indoh serves ngvouré. And now Mbe-e is accusing me!'

Ndiyzé smiled to himself. This is how a man should defend himself against Asobo-Ntsi. The Fon was too corrosive to approach him with bare palms, even if only to play.

Asobo-Ntsi regarded Ndenkaa for a while as if shocked by his courage to stand up to him. But it was instead admiration for the truth in the man's words. He too, Asobo-Ntsi, had not been able to see the hole in the calabash before now and the water usually leaked out without anyone's notice.

'Awa-nkaa too is right,' he said without sounding submissive. 'We have mistaken a porcupine for a squirrel in the past, and our traps have never been strong enough for the brute. But this time they will not escape. Ndindoh will once more sound his gong all over the village tonight. All those who are out of the land must be summoned

back before Ngheyu. Then on the night of Nipiare, Ti-indoh will smear all the roads leading out of the village. So let no guilty person think he can slip out in the morning and return at night. Everybody compound in your family must assemble here on Nghekob. Can we now say we speak with one mouth?' he again sounded conclusive.

'We speak with one voice, Mbe-e'. The chorus was mechanical and brought a similar glee on Asobo-Ntsi's lips. He was contented to see his notables concede to his opinions even if they were privately against them; and he mocked them in his glee, and they knew it, unable to resist: it was his moment of supremacy when unanimous feeling gave him the confidence he strove after, always. He knew too that alien footsteps will never cease pattering his ears but he was satisfied whenever – as was always the case – he could forge a voice in the sacred assembly. Then the fears that always plagued him were laid to rest and he could afford royal reprieve from formality, as he did now, in humble words of a harmless tongue.

'We must speak with one mouth,' he said, 'else we are doomed. If there is a bad coal in the fire we will all be driven out by smoke or go blind eventually if we decide to stay. Pienyen-Mechop,' he almost cried in a victorious voice, 'we should never allow a bad coal in our fireplace. Is that not our vow?'

The response was variously affirmative in another emphatic chorus. Ndiyzé, following this, knew what was to follow from the lips of Asobo-Ntsi in acknowledging consensus. It was like a ritual pattern, the habitual words he reserved for such moments, and the notables knew them by heart already, if there were slight variations, and listened to him every time only in passive acquiescence to their own ritualistic convictions. He will go on to invoke the oath of their founders as they broke and buried the spears that had been raised against each other's heart, and then spoke with one voice besides Qwang's swelling womb when she had flooded her own banks in the heart of the dry season. That was when Nyen knew no bad dreams at night, Asobo-Ntsi will remind them, and then conclude with what sounded like a prophetic threat: 'We can never change their word without first destroying ourselves!'

Now that his intimate concerns were already tackled and put aside, Asobo-Ntsi was relaxed and suddenly amicable, almost childishly so.

'What crimes have we committed,' he said turning to the

guard by the main door, 'that you have barred Pie-Zoh from coming in with his pot to save our throats from cracking?'

It was the cue Ndechi had been waiting for, and to avenge himself, he clung to it as if for breath.

'Ask him for me, Mbe-e,' he said, 'with his stomach like that of a pregnant woman. Just look at it,' he added, pointing, 'Medakih only thinks of himself, Mbe-e'.

The beleaguered guard merely pulled the beaded curtain aside and gestured. Pie-Zoh who had been waiting in the lower back court hurried in with a pot of wine, which he lowered onto a clay stand.

But Asobo-Ntsi was not finished with him yet; 'So what was really our crime, Pie-Zoh?' he teased.

'None, 'Tsa-apifor,' he said; 'only that good wine must be reserved to wash down good words'.

'Wise answer!' Ndenkaa commended, disentangling his shoulder calabash, which he carried in a fibre sack, from between his legs. He should be ready by the time Pie-Zoh came for it.

'And what if I disagree?' Ndechi said; 'Mbe-e seems to be initiating them into crafty ways'.

'Aha! Do you hear that now?' Asobo-Ntsi said, excited, as the others roared in agreement, always happy to taunt the Fon. The talk was taking just the direction he usually preferred though, and under the expectation of wine, as Pie-Zoh was about to serve them, he would listen to his notables and watch them without their being aware of anything. That way he knew how to tackle them.

'Tell me then, Ndechi,' he went on, 'how do I succeed to spoil them so much?'

'Those are not my words, 'Tsa-apifor,' Ndechi protested, pushing his calabash toward Pie-Zoh; 'you are twisting my tongue! But how can Mbe-e excuse Pie-Zoh when we were here even before palace fowls descended from their trees and it is only now that we can smell some raffia?'

'Do not listen to him Mbe-e,' Ndentim said; 'I was the only one to honour the royal summons on time'.

Ndenkaa laughed in a mocking tone.

'Do you think that will make Mbe-e to harvest a bunch of plantains for you?' he challenged.

'Unfortunately I am so poor,' Asobo-Ntsi said in a confessional tone, 'that I have to depend on what your children bring

to the palace'. And he again uttered one of his derisive laughs, blinking.

As Pie-Zoh began to serve, beginning with Asobo-Ntsi and then moving onto Ndiyzé before continuing down the line, Asobo-Ntsi nodded at the guard on his left and whispered in his ear. The latter disappeared through the curtained door while the second guard, his ntum secured over his navel, came forward to serve Asobo-Ntsi from the royal gourd.

Ndechi was already draining his second horn and smacked his lips wildly.

'Mbe-e,' he said, pausing briefly to tilt the calabash once more toward his rather over size horn, 'I wish I knew the bush from which you have been collecting your wine of late. This will make a man to forget the path to his home,' he added and then poured the liquid into his horn as if for confirmation of the fact.

'Ahh,' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'then ask Awa-nkaa. It is one of his sons who has supplied the palace with wine for five markets now'.

Ndechi was alarmed, but it was obvious to all that he was faking.

'How can that be, Mbe-e?' he said; 'there are no raffia bushes on the hills'.

'Then I may be making an error,' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'but I do not think Awah-Mbang is your child, Ndechi?'

The retort was unexpected and Ndechi's look was focused on his calabash as if untouched.

'That is a good question Tsa-apifor,' Ndenkaa declared in triumph. 'Some people never know when to open their mouths and do so only to shake black ants onto their heads'.

But if Ndechi could be silenced by a royal knock it was certainly not the case when a speck from Awa-nkaa's messenger was being pushed into his eye. He looked up as if stung by a bee.

'What is Ndenkaa boasting about?' he challenged. 'Mbe-e himself knows that Awa-Mbang's mother came from my own loins! Only a foolish man will drink wine and not ask to know the bush from which it came'.

A hollow laugh rumbled from Ndenkaa's throat. He was enjoying himself and pushing Ndechi out of his corner.

'Oh, I see!' he mocked, 'continue to groom the raffia groves so that we can continue to supply Mbe-e with his wine'.

‘That is not a fair judgement, Ndenkaa,’ Asobo-Ntsi cautioned; he had to step in when a man was pushed too hard on the ground.

The guard came in with a huge pod of kolanut. He handed it to Asobo-Ntsi who extracted his share and handed it back to the guard to then pass it round.

‘As I was saying,’ Asobo-Ntsi continued generally, ‘the hand that plants corn must also have the mouth to chew it after harvest’.

‘Whose hand and mouth Mbe-e?’ Ndenkaa who had concentrated on his horn said, peeling off the glittering ndiyong from his kolanut and slipping it into his mouth; ‘Ndechi or my father’s father? Do not make me laugh Tsa-apifor’.

They were all animated but for the two guards and Medakih. Pie-Zoh had withdrawn to a corner after serving the notables and was now helping himself directly from the remains in the pot. He was proud to be the royal pot-licker, and winked at Medakih from time to time.

‘You all misjudge the man,’ Asobo-Ntsi was saying. ‘But if there is one man in my land whom I will not trust in my barn, it is Ndechi’. Then knowing that Ndechi’s eyes were fixed on him, Asobo-Ntsi deliberately avoided them, becoming a gossip. ‘I hear he nearly broke his neck last Ntare when he was carrying another log of wood to Ndimengiu’s compound’.

Then he allowed himself the royal luxury of a deep glottal laugh, gesturing at Ndechi who was now staring at him with mastered shock, especially as the rest of the notables were greedily sharing the royal extravagance.

‘Aha, get him, Nyamtimah!’ Ndenkaa tittered.

‘Expose him for us, Mbe-e,’ Ndentin added; ‘some people think that they are invisible even in darkness forgetting that Asobo-Ntsi’s eyes see even through the gloom of the Awa-Pie pool!’

‘Who told you, Tsa-apifor?’ Ndechi was now appealing without giving in, and ignoring the others. He was not a man to be pushed down so easily. ‘People should not leave their eyes in the homes of others. If I broke my neck it is my problem,’ he said defiantly.

‘Ah! Now he is angry!’ Asobo-Ntsi exclaimed. ‘But did you hear him, Ndenkaa? How is it his problem alone when I know that Ndimengiu will not sleep without sending my own piece of wood?’

You do not know what you are talking about Ndechi. Asobo-Ntsi cannot afford to live without such promising intelligence!’ Then he sighed and called over his shoulder, ‘Cho-Muluh bring our pipe’.

The second guard lowered his bag from his shoulder from which he pulled out a long clay pipe. He was a wiry fellow walking as if he was unsure of his steps, testing the spot where he stood with each step he took. After squatting to the right of Asobo-Ntsi so that the Fon still commanded a complete view of his notables, and then positioning the pipe on his knee, Cho-Muluh began to apply fire to it by clashing his flint stones over a bit of tinder. Asobo-Ntsi puffed vigorously as the flame caught on, sucking in his jowls and then releasing thick smoke in frantic puffs. The notables had paused in his pleasure and engaged in shuffling through their bags, refilling their horns or simply gulping the wine, eyes closed. It was another interval with which they were unconsciously atoned; a brief moment of serene suspense during which the whole courtyard was suddenly a heavy pulse of silence in homage to Asobo-Ntsi and his pipe. After two or three more puffs, he waved Cho-Muluh aside and held out his horn to be refilled. He gulped once and then relaxed back in his stool. There was a stir in the room, a release that was as natural as if nothing had interrupted the previous discussion.

Ndenkaa was the first to find his voice.

‘How will the lion feel,’ he said, ‘if you only hear later that Ndechi shattered his shin while sneaking into Ndimengiu’s compound?’

‘I will immediately denounce him!’ Asobo-Ntsi laughed, ‘and then order Taangang not to wrap his healing mat around the damage. But we must be informed of any such happenings whenever they occur. In that way we will know that our people are growing. The woman who is shy to expose her laps dies in childbirth’.

But Ndechi was still not pacified. There was visible pain on his bearded face although everyone knew that he was capable of wearing the most pathetic expression even when he was thrilled.

‘But your people tell you too much, Mbe-e,’ he complained in mock anger. ‘They should wait until the banana is ripe before announcing its state’.

‘No, Ndechi,’ Asobo-Ntsi countered, ‘what if thieves harvest it before its rightful owner is aware of anything? Is Asobo-Ntsi still not the owner of all fruits in Nyen?’

‘Unless Ndechi has a different story for us, Mbe-e,’ Ndiyzé said, breaking his observant silence.

‘There is no other story, Ndiyzé,’ Ndechi conceded and then turning again to the Fon, ‘only that your people see and tell you too much, Mbe-e’.

‘I see,’ Asobo-Ntsi said after a gulp, ‘I see,’ he repeated as if talking to himself. For all his stiffness of will Asobo-Ntsi never really closed his ears to counselling statements even if he will not show it. Instead he took another mouthful from his horn and made as if he were rinsing out his mouth before swallowing.

‘May the Gods always bless Awah-Mbang on his way to the bush,’ he said in a prayerful diversion.

Ndenkaa sprang to his feet as if he had been waiting to be prompted and spreading out his arms in ample contentment he did a brief mbaghelem dance and ended up with a revering bow in front of Asobo-Ntsi.

‘Tsa-apifor!’ he hooted, ‘when the lion of the land blesses a man the Gods themselves dance on the threshold of his compound’. And he executed another dance back to his stool, beaming.

‘You deserve it, Ndenkaa,’ Ndentin commented, ‘but do not take all the honour and leave the child with nothing’.

‘I am the head and the loins, Ndentin,’ Ndenkaa retorted; ‘they follow my footsteps in seducing the liquid of the Gods rather than talk about people breaking their necks every year with logs of wood’.

But Asobo-Ntsi protested, he had to come in between, realizing that Ndechi was already snarling his lips, ready for battle.

‘It is still their duty to me,’ he said, and then explained, ‘that is how I know who to send on what errand and at what time. Some I send during the day under the sun, others at night when even the stars must be out, and still others must go under the rains or else everything collapses. Every messenger suits his mission and for me they are all very important. Otherwise we shall be surprised again by the Mefi-ime at night. It is unwise for us to sleep with both eyes closed’.

‘That is an insult to your chief priest’s family, Tsa-apifor!’ Ndechi protested with aboriginal impatience.

‘But it is only the truth,’ Asobo-Ntsi laughed. He liked pinching his notables in such relaxed moments, each according to his

flaw, personal or collective, and was pleased to watch them recoil in pain. He also knew that they would have loved to pinch him back, but they were unable to, fortunately for him. The realm of his powers prevented even the most blunt amongst them, and awed into humility then, they could only wriggle in mute confrontation. That took some of the excitement out of the game and made Asobo-Ntsi to sometime wish he were never invested with such overwhelming authority, especially as he was a child amongst them all. For he was often lonely too, unable to share in common pleasures of ordinary life, and so found a lot of comfort in such diversions with his notables.

‘But I will not refer to them again if it hurts you,’ he added in concession. And he felt happy to give in, to knock himself down so that his notables can have the illusion of gloating over his crownless person.

Ndiyzé suddenly cleared his throat in a typical telltale manner.

‘I think Tsa-apifor also wished to inform us about his visit to Ala’paph,’ he said and then went back into his shell from where the only notion of life thereafter was the movement of his horn to and from his lips. He knew that the Fon’s rascally mood would have pushed him to either spring the news on the notables at the last minute without giving them the chance of making their opinions known, or reserve the matter for another emergency meeting soon after.

‘Ah, yes!’ he exclaimed, nodding his head in an unnecessary manner that did not escape Ndiyzé’s scrutiny. He was so crafty he will like to dramatize everything when he was in the right humour.

‘You see,’ he went on, ‘Awah-Mbang’s wine can make a man forget to honour the first night with his bride’. Then suddenly the regal tone jumped into his voice and he was once more, unmistakably, Asobo-Ntsi. ‘I wanted to inform my notables that I should visit my brother in Ala’paph. His messenger was here two days ago. It seems our son is going to be betrothed.

There was consternation in the room, just as Asobo-Ntsi had expected. Ndenkaa was the first to find his voice, almost a husky whisper, protesting.

‘But he is only a child, Mbe-e,’ he declared; ‘that will spoil him!’

Ndenkaa had spoken for all, Asobo-Ntsi clearly saw this as

each of his notables nodded in agreement.

'You may be right,' he said in a coaxing voice, 'but it did not spoil me. Do we not say that the mouth that waters for meat must also learn about the bone inside the delicious flesh? Our son cannot depend on his mother all his life to chew fresh grain into his mouth'.

No one could dispute that; Asobo-Ntsi had chosen his words wisely and scattered the black clouds that were surging toward him. But there was still a small matter to be considered.

'I think I speak with all our mouths here,' Ndechi ventured, 'if I say that Tsa-apifor's words have gone down well with Awah-Mbang's wine. But we still have a fear, Mbe-e'. He looked around gravely as if hoping some other person would take over the load from his shoulder. But he quickly continued, not to appear awkward. 'You do not give Awah-Mbang's wine to a child and expect him not to chat and smile with you, convinced that he can drink in the same along with you and call you iyeh'.

The others nodded in agreement.

'There is yet another matter, Mbe-e,' Ndenkaa said, realizing that Ndechi was through, 'we have a flock of beautiful girls in the land. You don't need to go hunting for a rat for Teneng when there is an ox on the slab waiting for him'.

'Aha! I knew what to expect,' Asobo-Ntsi said, gathering his loins around his waist, 'you are only thinking of your many ngwangho-on as if we do not see them. Our son shall not disappoint you then'.

He was already on his feet, causing the notables to scramble up too, anxious not to betray the pain in their joints from the sudden rise.

'Did our fathers not remind us always that, a brother's gift is never refused? Of course we shall first get some of our own chicks into the rooster before looking elsewhere. Our trip to Ala'paph is only to inform our brother that we have not turned down his offer ... Cho-Muluh, let us see if Mafor has finished preparing our dish of mbang'.

And, as abruptly as he had stood up, Asobo-Ntsi left the hall followed by his immediate entourage. The notables smiled at each other knowingly. The palace was their home, Asobo-Ntsi will say as a reminder to the fact that they do not have to leave. As they felt for their stools and still awed by Asobo-Ntsi's eternal presence amongst

them, the sun was already falling on the threshold of the hall. Two princesses came in, bare bodied except for a blouse of beads falling over their breasts and below the navel over their waists. Their ankles and arms were plaited in a similar design. This was their first time of serving royal guests and they were almost trembling with each step they took. One balanced a basket of achu' on her head and an open-mouth calabash of water in her hand, while the other followed with the sauce in a clay pot and chunks of meat in an enormous straw bowl. Pie-Zoh stepped forward to relieve the maidens of the food, and they rushed out even without greeting the assembly, stumbling in confusion. Another spell of silence fell on the room as the notables adjusted their sitting positions to provide more space for the food.

Chapter Three

When the people sing and dance and feast, do not be deceived; they are not the happy lot they think they are. Soiled beds and lost brotherhoods threaten every laugh and every smile, and the sun's rays can become spears of woe in a wet season.

And so he wondered, listening to the whispery voice from the corner and then to his own heartbeats, if he had lips firm enough to breathe the communal burden; if he had the strength to utter them as naturally as the old man was doing.

He had said, looking at Tella'a with an ancient look: 'And the path hath grown so long and rough, entangled itself against itself that the people thought they needed new ways. And suddenly, they did not know what to do, almost, lost in their little hamlets. But follow it, where it leads, and trace the past and the present and the future to the point of knowledge, and of knowledge of knowledge'.

Ndechi wasted no time informing his people about the threats from the palace. His messengers shuttled through the quarter, moving from compound to compound, to inform the people. Those who were ready settled their dues on the spot, but others promised to go to Ndechi's palace. Yet others were stubborn, and openly defiant. One of the leaders of this group was Monjo who was normally known to be so orderly he was called the dog that never excretes in another's latrine. His anger resulted from the fact that as a warrior he deserved some consideration when it came to communal matters. But Asobo-Ntsi often treated them as if they were commoners. As the team left his compound, maddened by the man's blind threats against their heels with his machete, they decided to enter Ndimbah's compound if only to get a free drink. The man was a successful business man and as a child of the palace, he was one of the few to move out and settle under a different chief. He had been out that

morning to collect kolanut from his customers for the next Tewirikum market, and was now relaxing with his junior brother, Ndum. The two rarely sat together, so opposed were their views of how life should be tackled whether in the family or in the village. Ndum enjoyed nothing more than challenging the whole of Nyen to wrestle with him and now that he has been gulping horns-full of wine, he was more than ready for the pastime.

But there were more pressing issues to take care of such as the need for their father's successor. Ndum was convinced that all his misfortune was the result of the fact that their father's head was still to be brought into the house, and will not listen to any other explanation. He was a great planner, although it was clear that Ndimbah had to take care of all the expenditure.

'Then the team from the chief's palace strayed in, feigning to be on business.

'What is this old man doing in your house,' Sa'amontoh said, sneering at Ndum, 'during the planting season?'

'I am doing exactly what you are coming to do,' Ndum retorted. He had never known how to take a blow lying down. But he shifted, and pulled out stools for the visitors and gestured them toward the calabash.

'It is still half-full,' he said.

The men settled down fast, and it was clear that Ndimbah had to go back into his ntang for more wine.

'Asobo-Ntsi has vowed to roast everybody in Shih,' Sa'amontoh was saying to Ndimbah, 'if they do not pay their taxes'.

'That man is mad,' Ndum declared. 'He will end up roasting all of Nyen if no one stops him'.

The others laughed but it was not clear if they disagreed with Ndum.

'May be you take the lead,' Awasi said, teasing Ndum.

'Me?' and the spark flashed in his eyes; 'you think I cannot do it?' And he laughed in a drunken manner. 'Wait until he comes at me, then you will know that Ndum is not afraid of Nyen!'

A shadow fell across the door and the men looked up. It was Piembah, and Ndum brightened on seeing his brother's eldest son. Ndum had vowed during the last family meeting that the boy was the only person in the family who was strong enough, physical resemblance apart, to carry their dead father's stool. Whenever he

looked at the boy he saw their father reprimanding him for neglect, so much that he felt a certain awe merely standing beside the boy.

Piembah came in and greeted generally. He was bored with everything, and a vacant look lingered in his eyes, and like his greetings, he saw people from afar. He was refusing any form of kinship, and not even his father could be sure of where his next step will take the boy. But Ndum seemed to have a sudden faith in the boy and conjured his acts like a dibia.

Piembah lingered in his father's house like a spirit and responded to the guests without seeing them. His recent impatience was now complicated by a streak of boredom across his face, a lurking shadow that threatened anyone in his way – that is anyone except Ndum. Ndimbah was watching the two everyday in wonder, but decided to keep his thoughts to himself. The boy beckoned Ndum with an eye wink and they both went outside from where the others, surprised at the intimacy, only got broken whispers until Ndum made the final audible remark: 'No problem, leave it to me'. Piembah left with the understanding that he was to meet Ndum in the evening for them to finalise the plan. He did not bother to greet his father's visitors again.

Piembah had been up very early that morning and quickly prepared himself to go out for his usual routine. He went behind the house to ease himself and yawned expansively in the process, stretching like a roped bull struggling to be free. He was relaxed and recalled the day his father had confronted him for taking too much liberty in his compound.

'Mo-onyam!' the old man had shouted, emerging from his fenced part of the compound, erect with purpose, 'where do you think you are? Show me your hill and I will invite people to erect your own hut! But never yawn again like that while under my roof'.

That incident came back to him as he felt the comforting relaxation of his bladder; and looking across the pear and kolanut trees in his father's compound, Piembah contemplated the gentle slope of the Atoualon plain where he will like to have his home and plant his own fig tree. That way he will command a good view of the village settlement, clustered together in the hollowed humus plain of

Loup, and serve at the same time as the land's sentry against any more surprise attacks from Tipah their most restive and unpredictable neighbour to the north west.

But he was suddenly sad, speculating the prospects of his life. To have his home and live the way he wished, Piembah knew too that he had to be a man, grown up and capable of the things that grown up men do, not just a boy listening to his father for the day's scheduled activity and depending on his mother and his father's other wives for his food.

His father was already tired, as he often told his friends, of watching a son grow old in his compound. How could he convince people that he could pay the bride prices for five wives without even a kapa in arrears, but was unable to pay that of his first son? So he would not let Piembah enjoy his meals, taunting him to stop exploiting his wives.

'A man who is a man should have his own food basket,' he said, 'and not depend on the planting baskets of his mothers'.

But his choices were not what the son wanted. The old man was more interested in strengthening his existing relations and was deaf to whatever the son said in challenge.

'It will be like a family,' he tried to convince Piembah, 'and we shall have no disputes except for those that are inevitable in family life'.

His eyes became misty from too much concentration on the chosen hill of his future home. And to inform his father of this he will be ready too to accept one of his haphazard choices for wife. But how could he tell the old man that he has seen that woman already and would give everything up to have her?

He returned to his ntang, attached to his mother's house. He walked with slow, meditative steps, brooding over the lapse in his future. This was what disturbed his mother the most, the son's sudden gloomy silence, responding to people as if he was not physically present nor aware of their own presence. There seemed to be something else in him taking the place of speech. He did not eat too, merely touching his food and pushing the bowl aside for his dog.

His mother complained about the waste he was subjecting himself to, and even tried to scold him. But he merely glanced at her and the blank look came back into his eyes.

'Pong'hepi will eat for the two of us,' he said shortly, referring

to his half-tail dog, always squatting on its hind legs whenever Piembah nibbled at his food, anticipating its master's benevolence.

Baffled, Piembah's mother had approached the second wife, hoping to diagnose her son's worries.

'Is it today that you are noticing it?' the other woman had said; 'Piembah has been searching for something for about five markets today,' she added in a conspirator's voice. 'It was Ngwikwih who told me,' she concluded.

Then the mother understood; it was all so clear now and she wondered why she had been so blind, unable to see the heart of the son she thought she knew. Ngwikwih was her husband's last wife and was naturally the ideal person to mediate in such serious errands for Piembah. But the mother's heart fell when she approached the younger woman and she will not disclose anything about her errands.

'It is now my turn to be manda-ngan,' she laughed, adding that Piembah had vowed to cut off her head if she dared to disclose anything to anyone. The mother sighed; she could only pray that it was a respectable choice Ngwikwih and her son were after.

For several days she watched the son for the remotest signs but he was stubbornly himself, locked up in his own thoughts, comfortable behind his shield of manhood, avoiding people and talking very little.

She listened to him as he walked back to his ntang and could see him throwing his trap gadgets into his bag. He was soon out of the house, and whistled for Pong'hepi. After feeding her the two hurried off, taking the track behind the house toward the twin caves where Piembah set his traps.

Once beyond the compound he seemed to be free, a new agility came into his limbs as he picked his way along the overgrown tracks of his routine. In his hand and dangling from a plaited cord, was a small calabash that contained the urine which he sprinkled at specific spots where he set his traps along the rat mole's path. Eventually, the stale scent ensnared the greedy animal with sharp little teeth into his trap less than a step ahead. An evil smile lingered on his lips as the thought crossed his mind that those spots had become his little holes of doom. He made the rounds twice every day, and knew every hedge and bump on his way with accustomed familiarity.

As he worked his way through the undergrowth, inspecting

and repairing his traps as he moved along, his mind was abroad and it was only sheer mechanical dexterity that permitted him to engage his task. For the last three days his ultimate trap had failed him and would not snap when he expected it to. For he had spent a whole moon studying the work schedule of Wonyen, his intended bride, together with her mother, tailing them to distant farmlands and eavesdropping behind the muddled enclosure of their home at night. To avoid suspicion of any kind he had intensified his friendship with Khan-Minie, his age mate with whom he shared the same clearing groups. After their clearing sessions he will invite his friend to accompany him on an errand to old Chehlong's home where even half a squirrel will be enough to procure for them a big calabash of wine. At first the old man used to join them and they will spend the rest of the afternoon drinking and chewing kolanut, with the boys having the illusion of being old men. Then Piembah started giving excuses, winking at his friend, that he had to accompany his father somewhere with wine, repair the pigsty, or fell wood for his mothers. They would then spend the rest of the time in either of their ntang drinking and talking and laughing.

And it was Khan-Minie who actually led Piembah into thinking seriously about Wonyen, even becoming jealous.

'Nkiuati will be visiting my father this evening,' he had said casually. Nkiuati was one of the wealthiest men in the land and did not hide the fact in his generosity.

'What for?' Piembah said without concern.

'Are you blind?' his friend retorted in an incredulous tone; 'do you not notice that Wonyen is now ripe for the strong man's hand?' he laughed.

But Wonyen was turning down Nkiuati's son, he said, although that is the way they all behave at first, he added. Very soon it will require guards to restrain her from running away.

Night after night, thereafter, Piembah lay awake; he could not sleep and his mind was wandering. And always it returned to him, tired and wasted, unfulfilled. He was always thinking of Wonyen, she was making him unsure of himself, as his manhood seemed to desert him. Every night she became the focus of his wandering heart, seeking reprieve. It was as if she had just come into the world for him with previous defects smoothened out into a gloss of unknown beauty. Her very presence, even as she passed at a distance, when he

was in a group, made Piembah to stammer. She was suddenly the apparition for his heart and the more he thought about her, the more determined he became to have her. Khan-Minie had said she was ripe for the strong man's hand and Piembah did not want to think that he, the pride of his age group, was not that strong man, even if as he often told his friends, he was still to be rich. Was he not the one who wore the leading mask whenever their age group had to perform at a funeral? And was Nkiuati's son not one of the many who were only useful to the group in terms of filling up its ranks, shouting, and sat along the last wall in their age group?

He was finally forced to confess his mind to Khan-Minie; it was such a burden to be borne alone and he seemed to be experiencing a certain feeling of weakness.

'Then what are you waiting for?' Khan-Minie had asked as if it was such a normal thing to say, one need not worry about.

Their visits to Khan-Minie's ntang became more frequent and pronounced. They began talking like men, Khan-Minie doing deference for his friend, infecting their speech with a conscious pause and dragging tone like men do. If their friends complained they simply looked at them with the indifference of maturity, or simply said they would come to learn with time. In the meantime, Piembah seized every opportunity to say something to Wonyen, a greeting or a welcome when it happened that she was the one who came for Khan-Minie's food basket. But she was too shy to give a straight face response, and fumbled on her way out.

'That is how they all behave,' Khan-Minie said, 'if they only suspect your intention'. But he also knew that his stepsister lacked that natural disposition to confront any preying male and often protected her on their way from the village dance when the moonlit night made boys to go wild and behave like hungry lions.

'Are you ready to fight Nkiuati's family?' he asked his friend one day as they returned from inspecting his traps.

Piembah was not sure of what to say. The question was unexpected, even in its tentative manner, but its impact was enormous. He too had considered that possibility and realized that he was trying to do what had never been done in Nyen. His father would never hear of such a thing and people may even look at him as a fool. Like Nkiuati's son, he too was of the royal family, privileged among all other families in the village and consequently expected to

set standards. He knew that his father would never consent to carrying wine to the compound of a man he knew had already uncorked another's calabash for the same prize apart from the blood ties.

Only one option remained open to Piembah: he will have to run away with Wonyen if it were necessary, before any other thing happened to prevent him. The following afternoon he told Khan-Minie of his plan without elaboration.

'The latter looked at him with wild unseeing eyes, speechless.

'You are crazy!' he said at last.

'Maybe,' Piembah said simply. He had suddenly become a man of very few words even with his friend. What was going on in his head could not be expressed adequately in words and he increasingly became meditative and unpredictable.

'All you have to do is make it possible for your follower to begin talking to me,' he said as if he had it all planned out.

Their surveillance of Wonyen and her mother intensified. They knew all their farmlands and would be there hiding in the bushes, long before the family arrived. Or, if an assignment from his father interrupted a scheduled trip, Piembah became passive, working from his mechanical consciousness.

One night just when he was about to go to bed after another hopeless wait behind the wall, Piembah heard the familiar footsteps of his friend lurching into their compound. Even at night Khan-Minie could not help kicking stones.

'Tyèl' he whispered, gently tapping on the door.

When Piembah opened the door Khan-Minie was too excited to speak. He grabbed Piembah's hand, mumbling words that his friend could not understand and then tried to drag him outside but Piembah resisted, not very sure.

'What is the matter?' Piembah whispered, slightly alarmed.

'Tomorrow ... tomorrow is the day!' the other stammered.

'What day?' There was a slight tone of impatience in Piembah's voice.

Piembah heard his mother's bed creak; she was awake and probably listening. He pushed his friend outside and pulled the door after them. The moon was peeping from under a thick fold of clouds.

'Wonyen goes to the farm alone tomorrow,' Khan-Minie said, 'with only Ngum and Ateh!'

‘What has happened?’ Piembah asked, confused.

‘Her mother’s father is dying and all his children have to be there tomorrow. Ndikum just brought the message and I heard the mother of Wonyen discussing with my mother. She wanted to know if my mother would supervise Wonyen on how to lay the ankarè ridges.

‘Then your mother will be there!’ Piembah said with disappointment.

‘Oh no!’ Khan-Minie said. He seemed to have everything well thought out. ‘She and her farming group will be on Menyi’s farm tomorrow. But Ngwikwih will be farming in the same area. Wonyen’s mother says she will ask her to assist the girls.

And that was how Ngwikwih became part of the conspiracy. Piembah thought of it again, the fear and anxiety that appeared and disappeared on Ngwikwih’s face as they discussed the matter the following morning, and smiled to himself, noticing at the same time that the grass was greatly disturbed a short distance ahead where he had his trap. It was then too that he was aware of Pong’hepi’s excitement, rushing forward and backwards with subdued whining of secret knowledge, and unable to fully convince the abstract master with her stumped tail.

Piembah quickened his steps, his hand on the hilt of his waist knife, ready to pull it out of its sheath if necessary. There was a big rat mole in his trap still struggling to break away, hanging awkwardly. It had twisted the cord to just a few tiny strands and not knowing how close it was to freedom, it had given up the struggle and instead began gnawing at the foreleg that had been caught in tricky loop. On seeing Piembah, the animal balled itself off in one last act of desperation. At the same time, Piembah’s well-aimed stick caught it across the forehead and it went limp, dangling from the weak strands, and bleeding in sharp sniffs. Pong’hepi was barking all over the place, as Piembah made sure the animal was really dead. He held it upside down so that the blood dripped for some time from the impact of his blow. Then he lifted it into his hunting bag, knowing that the warm blood will trickle through the bag and course down his limb, thick, and attract the flies.

Then he walked on, unconscious of his manipulations through by-ways, setting and adjusting his traps, or collecting a catch, and aware only of his beating heart beyond him. That was the way it

was, he recalled, on the morning he decided to be a man and dragged Ngwikwih into his secret. She had known something was wrong from the way he nibbled his food. But by the time he left her hut she had forced him to confess his heart and suddenly he felt free and manly.

Although she knew the consequences of his decision, Ngwikwih had set to work almost immediately and the following day invited Wonyen to braid her hair. Then they made plans to become farming partners whenever possible, and exchanged girlish secrets as they became more and more intimate. It was in this way that between three markets of their renewed contacts Ngwikwih proposed one of her sons to Wonyen.

‘But you are only seven moons in marriage!’ Wonyen said, pausing in her hoeing to look up at the other woman whose belly was barely noticeable.

‘It does not matter,’ Ngwikwih retorted. ‘I am a woman and every woman is a mother in some way’.

They had laughed in thrilling echoes, their voices vibrating down the narrow valley where they farmed. They were young and although Ngwikwih was the elder and already showed signs of womanhood, they looked more like age mates. They talked about the possible suitors available to Wonyen who said her father was already receiving people but her enthusiasm in acknowledging or rejecting a name told Ngwikwih like nothing else could, that she had not yet mentioned the real person.

‘Maybe it is even your son,’ Wonyen teased.

‘You mean Piembah?’ Ngwikwih said.

‘Yaa!’ Wonyen screamed playfully, ‘is that the man you call your son? He looks like the kind of man who will never be satisfied with anything unless he beats his wife every night’.

That evening Ngwikwih had talked to Piembah. She informed him of the extent to which Nkiuati’s son had gone in paying the dowry, and cautioned that it would be a thing never done before for him to try to engage the future wife of another palace child. Piembah had recoiled into himself again, thinking, ‘So I am not strong enough to take her hand!’ Then he knew what he had to do and nobody was going to stop him.

A shiver ran through his body as he dumped his bag on a huge boulder with a flat top. Although the morning was still cold there were tiny beads of perspiration on his forehead and nose

glinting against the weak rays of the sun

He removed his catch and methodically began to disembowel it. Pong'hepi crept closer wagging the remnant of her tail in anticipation. His mother had never forgiven him for feeding the dog with the entrails; for she will dangle them from a bamboo grill above her hearth and soon they will be smoked into a hard crispy tangle, which she would preserve jealously. It was a rare spice for her favourites like an in-law or an obedient child in the compound. Even Piembah would have no access to it any more. Otherwise, she will cut off a bit and run it through warm ashes before scattering it between her thumb and index finger into a near dusty spice over her bowl of achu'. It was unwise of him, she reprimanded, to think only of Pong'hepi all the time.

Piembah was careful not to cut the bile prematurely. Using the tip of his knife he traced the veins and thin films of dividing chambers, feeling the warm flesh against the back of his hand and inhaling the weak vapour rising from the cut before clipping off the little black pouch. Even Pong'hepi was indifferent to it, making a sharp anxious turn of the head as it flew by, before her ears dropped in recognition as Piembah tossed it over the edge. The entrails were what she was always waiting for after they had been cut into sizeable chunks. She gobbled them down, her eyes rolling as her tongue darted out after the meal, licking her black slimy nose and the corners of her mouth. Then Piembah stuffed fresh grass into the hollow of the animal, making the remains to be exaggeratedly full.

He knew he had a long time to wait for Khan-Minie's arrival. But it did not disturb him for there was nothing else to do.

Piembah had dosed off in the warm, humid morning, spread out on the rock like a man whose only concerns were food, drink and sleep. He was caught up in the kind of weak, dewy stupor that always turned his stomach whenever he tasted wine that was too sweet. But he was also weak this time and sleepy, with the sun coming down on him like a warm bath. But he had also been too busy, mentally, of late, withdrawn into himself and sharing his thoughts only with the three people he had drawn into his secret. So the warm vapour rising from the rock and mingled with the many smells of blooming flowers

that still dotted the wild plants and around which the bees buzzed, knocked him off like a calabash of dry wine. He was relaxed in the dreamy state of his exhausted mind, sleeping only on the surface and still alert to the external world always closing in on him and his thoughts. The world still pressed on his consciousness and he was aware of the nagging insistence from distant sounds against his straying steps.

Then Pong'hepi started barking in friendly yaps, whining. It was too close for Piembah to remain unaware, dragged out of his stupor. At the same time he heard the wild swish-swash of the grass toward him, and did not bother to open his eyes, recognising the straddling, swish-swash walk of his friend.

Khan-Minie came up and dumped his bag besides Piembah's.

'When are we leaving for Tipah?' he greeted, kicking Piembah's leg.

'What for?' Piembah said without opening his eyes.

'What do you mean? What is this that I see hanging near you?' He was pointing at the rat mole, unaware that his friend had not even opened his eyes. 'Nwuoupang will give us his wife to have this, and you know that!'

'It is not for him,' Piembah said, a strain in his voice.

'Then I know who will have it!' Kahn-Minie said as if he had solved a puzzle. 'I was a fool not to think of it'. He sounded disgruntled but Piembah knew he was only acting.

'Here,' Khan-Minie went on, 'here is your basket from your wife'.

Piembah leapt up with his eyes wide open.

'My wife?' he echoed trying in vain to hide his anxiety.

'You heard me,' the other mocked, 'or are you deaf?'

'You mean ...' Piembah stammered. His heart was beating faster now.

'Yes, I mean Ngwikwih,' Khan-Minie said, deliberately sarcastic.

Piembah fell back on his elbow, the sparkle gone out of his eyes.

'But you know Ngwikwih is my mother,' Piembah said sourly. His heart was heavy and beginning to wander again over every scrap of hope and possibility he had examined. True, Ndum had told him repeatedly not to worry, that he would assume full responsibility if his

brother was too much of a coward to act like a man whose son deserves the woman he wants.

'I know!' Khan-Minie was saying, 'that is why she knows the problem with your stomach. Just look at the basket she sent,' he added grudgingly.

But Piembah was only half listening and in order to appear engaged in the conversation he even feigned a smile in acknowledgement of the compliment. But if only it was as easy as Ndum and Ngwikwih made it look! Even Wonyen's mother did not know what was going on, while the girl herself was only faintly aware of possible gestures regarding her like a threat. Even then, Piembah knew too that her mother will never turn down Nkiuati, after all he was closer to the throne than Piembah's father. Who knows, one day Wonyen may become Queen or her son crowned Fon if she were to marry Nkiuati's son.

Piembah looked ahead, into the cloudy distance of his life, but could only see darkness, blinding darkness that would engulf him if he did not listen to Ndum and act accordingly. That seemed to be his only chance of getting what he wanted and he would not let it go.

'My son, listen to me!' Ndum had whispered to him a day after he met them drinking with his father. 'Once we carry her into your ntang she would be branded forever in the eyes of everybody including Nkiuati's son'. He had nudged Piembah in the ribs, as his whispered plan was unveiled to the two friends. He always whispered his most intimate thoughts, even in the heart of Mitanyen when the roar of human voices hung in the afternoon sun like a pall.

Ndum had fixed the snatching day to coincide with the Fon's hunt during which every able body prince together with all professional hunters in the village, would either be on the hills or exhausted on return.

'Only women shall be left in Nyen,' he said, 'and when the men return in the evening they shall be weaker than women'. Then he laughed in a dry crackling sound.

'You too shall go hunting, Ndum ...' Khan-Minie began.

'Me? Who said so?' Ndum sounded surprised, laughing in a hollow contentment. 'I have hunted for Asobo-Ntsi ever since he came to the throne and did not even know then how to place his buttocks on the royal stool. That was so many dry seasons ago. A man gets old and tired'.

But he will still not disclose his entire plan to them.

'Wait for the day Nyen will know that Ndum still has a son!' he laughed again, passing the gourd of steaming wine round.

Piembah reached out for the bundle Khan-Minie handed to him and was relieved at the hard-softness when he felt it. Ngwikwih knew his preference for afoufou and often bundled out his share before adding water to the remaining one in the mortar to make it more pasty. He sprinkled water over his stained fingers from a small farm calabash. The blood on his fingers was already dry but he was too hungry to be methodical. The vegetable and egusi soup spiced with fresh mushroom and dried deer meat was just what he needed.

They swallowed in silence with only thunderous reports coming from their throats. Pong'hepi had instinctively crawled toward Piembah, but it was instead Khan-Minie who started throwing lumps at her. She snapped at them, her stumped tail working with an effort, before turning to the ones Piembah had piled for her on a leaf.

Chapter Four

Ritual and gaming alternated in the daily life of Nyen: even the eerie notes of mandere made way for the bard to eulogise their burdens, flatter raw tongues into conceding friendship. ‘Tears flow for happy and sad moments and why then curse the happy lot in tears?’ That was the bard’s lot, burdened to please and insult in one tongue, but still receive his kola without a wince. Only the ritual-man knows which words to dangle over the communal shrine while the Gods wait at the crossroads for the vagrant steps.

Three days before the royal hunt Ndum rubbed his left knee with thick python fats and coaxed Mepfuré to agree with his plans if anybody was foolish enough to ask her. Then he used a string to tighten his thigh below his puffy ntum and dangled it a bit to make sure the rope was not too tight for necessary comfort. Then he had limped to the palace dragging the visibly swollen leg along with a huge staff. He collapsed on a long log-stool placed along the palace wall, and signalled a guard. He desired to talk to Asobo-Ntsi himself and not through messengers.

‘I have been cursed by the Gods,’ he moaned, pointing at the damaged leg.

‘Tell me, what happened?’

‘Mepfure!’ Ndum exclaimed, ‘this is my reward for trying to be a good husband,’ he lamented.

‘Did she hit you with her pestle?’ The guard was alert with curiosity and already anticipating a royal order to whip the recalcitrant woman.

‘No, that is not what happened young man,’ Ndum cried trying to fight back the imaginary pain. ‘I wanted to please her if only that we could fall down that evening,’ he explained. ‘So I went to Mamben and cut the biggest log of wood for her. The Gods themselves helped me carry it! But just as I was climbing the rise behind Monjo’s compound, on my way back, I slipped and fell but the log refused to reach the ground and instead rested on my knee!’

He was whining again.

The guard was visibly disappointed. He had hoped it was a case of wife stubbornness so that Asobo-Ntsi could dispatch them to drag the recalcitrant woman to the palace. There was no greater pleasure than exacting royal punishment on such wayward wives or husbands if Asobo-Ntsi found them to be in the wrong instead. But he was dismayed that it was a mere case of male carelessness.

‘Who told you that Asobo-Ntsi breast-feeds men who are not men?’ he said in a sarcastic tone.

‘What is wrong with you, fellow?’ Ndum screamed, almost getting to his feet; ‘Asobo-Ntsi to breast-feed me! Did I inform you that Mepfure’s pot is leaking? And you dare call me a woman!’

‘Then what is the reason for this early visit?’ The guard was already backing away, conciliatory. ‘Asobo-Ntsi is still roosting – are you not a Nyen man?’

‘Young man, listen to me,’ Ndum stuttered staggering to his feet. ‘If you feel that because of your hairy laps you can spit on my years, then you are still to know Ndum!’ He was making frantic gestures and skipping about on his buttocks like an unbroken horse. ‘If you want me to remind you of my duties to Asobo-Ntsi, then just stand like this and inform him that Ndum will be present for the royal hunt on Nkap’.

The guard stared at him in disbelief, open-mouthed.

‘What good will a leg like that do Asobo-Ntsi at Nipen?’ he said.

But Ndum waved him aside, struggling to his feet, and limped into the courtyard and spread out himself on a bamboo bench, face up. He was enjoying himself already. The swollen leg hung miserably by his side, and he waited. The guard shuffled into the palace grumbling to himself; Ndum smiled, anticipating a visit from Asobo-Ntsi himself!

He waited for some time and was beginning to get worried that the guard had played some stupid trick on him. He had expected Asobo-Ntsi to summon him into the palace as soon as the guard transmitted the message.

Then a voice called out for him from one of the inner palace gates, coming out. It was Medakih. Even without looking Ndum recognised his nasal, snuff-brazen voice. It was said that he got up in the middle of the night to take a pinch and then will sneeze till dawn. That way too he frightened the evil spirits away from the palace gate.

There was a story of how he had sneaked into Nkemetah's compound just when people were getting into their second wave of sleep, to spend the night with one of Nkemetah's young wives. But the woman had hardly locked the door after him when Medakih was possessed by a sneezing fit. Nkemetah who had been suspecting the bachelor for some time quickly rallied his kinsmen and they waited for him outside with huge clubs. Medakih only came out the following day, aware of the siege around his tryst, when the sun was straight overhead. Still, he was baffled by shame as the curious crowd that had gathered booed and threw dirt at him. Fortunately for him Asobo-Ntsi had been notified and a royal messenger had been dispatched to bring him to the palace, whenever he came out, unmolested. The woman was clean-shaven and banned from leaving her marital home for thirteen markets. Medakih was administered a treatment of royal thrashing and then further punished to clear Nkemetah's farms for two seasons. That was also how he joined Asobo-Ntsi's services, thereafter.

These stories ran through Ndum's mind in a flash as he pulled himself up from the bench.

'Iyeuh!' he greeted, 'the ostrich is running on the ground'. And he groaned, getting up.

'That is what I see,' Medakih said blowing out his nose like a double bar trumpet and rubbed his palms together. 'Asobo-Ntsi sends you his salute. He is glad you still wish to go hunt, but advises that you should wait for next season's hunt'. Ndum began to shake his head when Medakih quickly added, looking into his bag, 'He has also sent you this small bundle as a sign of his gratitude'.

Medakih handed Ndum a bundle neatly wrapped in dry plantain skin.

'It is part of last year's catch,' he explained.

That evening he narrated the whole drama to Mepfure with significant modifications, how he raised his stick to crush the skull of the stubborn guard and Medakih had to raise a timely alarm which then brought out Asobo-Ntsi himself with apologies and then ordered for the conciliatory bundle to be prepared for him. But he still refused to disclose the reasons behind his scheming to Mepfure only saying that all of Nyen must learn to respect Ndum thereafter.

Ndum cleared his throat noisily and swallowed hard at the same time. He had just finished his morning meal of two bundles of achu' spiced with dried tadpoles and mushrooms. He rubbed his palms together then ran them vigorously over his shins, making the usual prayer in supplication, 'O, feet of mine, never say I did not think of you over my meal, and never forsake me when danger is around!' He was in unusual high spirits and his wife, Mepfurè, was curious.

'My son is going to be a man today!' Ndum announced, running his right palm over his bushy mouth in a clinical brush and producing gaggling sounds of contentment from his throat.

'Your son?' Mepfurè asked in disbelief. 'What are you talking about?' Their only living son had drowned four rainy seasons ago, just when he was about to join Nwuoupang at Tipah to construct the house of Nwuoupang's new God, which they claimed could never be destroyed. Ndum was against his going out there not only because he was worried by the new religion, but also especially as he confessed to his brother, the boy may end up staying with his mother's people.

'I am talking about my son, woman! Or is Piembah not my son?'

Mepfurè bowed in submission, still wondering where this was all leading. It was true that Ndum had always been praised by his friends whenever Piembah accomplished a feat, like when he had gone through the rites of manhood shortly after Asobo-Ntsi came to the throne; everybody had acclaimed his resilient nature, with not even a twitching muscle on the face to betray him. But Ndum enjoyed watching people run after him in speculation even when the outcome was as trivial as an announcement that his hen had hatched all but one of her eggs and that the lone egg was going to be offered to the priest of Tisagli for his divinations. Mepfurè knew it was useless trying to get any more than she already knew from her husband and began gathering her farm tools.

When he got back to his house, Ndum again inspected the calabashes of wine. The foremost calabashes contained the brew for the men, that which was described as 'dry,' to discourage his daughters and his brother's wives, especially Ngwikwih from sneaking in with a wooden bowl when he was temporarily out of the house to gush out the sweetest brew.

As he turned away from the calabashes thinking of the flame he was about to ignite, Ndum heard his friend Tella, yelling a greeting. Although he was on his way to Swarènka to get coffee suckers from his father-in-law, he branched off into Ndum's compound; their friendship began since they were children and they knew each other with almost a sacred attachment.

'Mepfurè!' he called, pausing at her door, 'is it dawn?'

Although he was short, Tella still stooped at the door.

'Is it the father of my husband?' Mepfurè greeted, coming down from her lower ceiling with small soot-covered calabashes containing her seedlings. 'How is my husband?' she said. Tella's youngest son was named after Ndum's father who is said to have helped Tella's father to get his only wife. The people still lived for such pumpkin stem relationships that entangled everyone.

'So you people slept well?' Tella said, balancing his foot on the raised mud ledge that supported the plaited bamboo frame.

They chatted for a while. Then Mepfurè went into the dark corner of her bed and came back with a small solidly wrapped bundle of tobacco.

'Taste last season's remains,' she said offering the opened bundle to Tella who took a pinch into his mouth, rolled it over with his tongue and nodded.

'This is from Montoh's stone,' he declared.

'You can never mistake his hand once you taste of his tobacco,' Mepfurè agreed. It was my daughter,' she went on in explanation, 'you know Azah the daughter of my brother who is married to Montoh's second son?' Tella was nodding like a wall gecko, helping himself at the same time to a more generous pinch, which he secured in a small Indian bamboo tube attached to his ntum.

Mepfurè was still chattering, of how her daughter sent her the bundle on Ntare to apologize for not coming to assist her with farm work as promised. Was that not the way children should behave, she queried, and not show disrespect to their own mothers like Sirri-Zoh – has Tella heard of that latest gossip? – who told her own mother that she was old enough to decide for herself.

'Where has such a thing ever been heard of, the father of my husband!' she tittered away, unaware that Ndum who was expecting his friend was already in his inner courtyard, impatient. 'That is when

she ran away to that boy at Kongntoh with his head like that of a man who has hit a pillar escaping from Mopouh!' She was disgusted and spat out in anger, and if it were her own daughter, her ancestors forbid what she would have done to her!

'Tella,' Ndum called, 'that woman will not let you go if you do not run away from her'.

'Yuou-woo!' Mepfurè cooed in self-recrimination, gently pushing Tella away in a shy gesture.

The two men had been friends ever since they were youths, bursting with vigour and had escaped from an over night German camp together. News had reached the village that Nwuoupang was constructing a palace for his own chief and was conscripting labourers from all the villages. Asobo-Ntsi openly cooperated with the team of stern looking men without lips wearing steel caps, but at night Kwi'for went round the village instructing all the able male children to disappear into the Ngong forest before the next visit. It was rumoured that Nwuoupang's secret plan was to assist Tipah defeat Nyen eventually, when there were no more men to defend the land. Even more scary was the allegation that the conscripts were to be castrated into Nwuoupang's foupou's, who guard his fortress.

The two friends never tire of recalling the night of their heroism whenever they met, or referred to it as justification for pounding their chests so arrogantly in opposition to their friends.

On the first night of their capture on the way to Atisong, they were forced to sleep in a valley with guards from Tipah forever keeping watch. Nwuoupang was curled up in a makeshift tent reading.

It was Tella who nudged Ndum out of sleep in the middle of the night and whispered the possibility of escape. It was threatening to rain and four of the guards were busy cutting raffia branches to set up their own tent. The remaining guard on duty had no heart in the job (as Tella later told curious villagers) and was soon nodding from his raised position, unaware of the threatening rains.

Ndum rubbed his eyes and tried to focus his surroundings. Tella clasped his hand over his friend's mouth, making wild gestures with the other. In the obscure light Ndum could barely see the rush of activity slightly above them against the skyline. He was shocked to see that Tella's legs were free. They had been huddled together in pairs around the ankles with thick twine, and kept at arm's length

from each couple.

'Here,' Tella whispered, handing a small calabash the size of a young pear fruit, to Ndum. Although it was dark to see, Ndum immediately caught the familiar smell of pork at the same time that Tella was helping him rub his left ankle with fats. Ndum immediately understood and used his finger to tuck out some of the clot and rubbed his other ankle. The knots held stubbornly for a while and then began to slacken against the fatty rub.

As the first raindrops cut across the thick undergrowth of the valley, Tella succeeded in rolling the loops over Ndum's heel. That was enough for them to attempt a break as the heavy drops roused the dosing guard. He spat out a remark at the conscripts before rushing toward the other guards.

Ndum gathered the remaining rope in his hand but made sure it was loose enough not to impede their escape very much. The rain had already forced the rest of the group out of sleep and Tella was whispering to them what to do with the calabash. As he and Ndum slipped away, forging a path behind the camp further down into the valley to pick their way along river, there was frantic activity among the others, exchanging furious whispers for the calabash.

'That was the day we proved our manhood,' Tella would say, repeating a worn out phrase.

As Tella lowered himself onto a stool which his friend had arranged, he spat out the tobacco chaff into the corner and started searching his bag for his horn. They were sitting in his inner yard, cut off from public view by a fence studded with palm fronds and their past, as it was always the case, crept into their conversation like a spice. But something was wrong; Tella looked up at his friend whose suddenly abstracted face with its whimsical sneer brought back memories of things that could not be expressed in any form of utterance.

'I am listening,' he said simply, filling his horn. The suckers could wait for the next day; he was more concerned with the present and would pay it homage in negligence of all other things.

'My son is about to become a man,' Ndum said, 'and you may have to help me'.

Chapter Five

Totemic ancestry, revisiting
Nyen and her progeny at the crossroads;
And the jungle was a yearly plenitude
Into the ample hands of Asobo-Ntsi,
Achu' spice-giver of Nyen.
Disagreements eclipsed over split kola lobe
As a mask stood tall, man without face
And beast without guile,
And surveyed the wild stretch
Whose paths betrayed the elusive game.
And Asobo-Ntsi, seated royally by the floating cloths,
One white with phallic arrogance
And the other red with mysteries of the womb;
And both traced with scrawls of invincibility and raging fury
As ancestral art of Nyen's glory,
Recalled the days of abortive strive, lived and retold,
And how revived strategy fathomed abundance in awe.
And the gongs of manderè were a pleasant sigh...

The Nipen cascaded over its jagged cliff into the ever-widening pool below with a solemn, almost mournful, sonority and echoed the wooded grove like a hollow voice from a calabash. The great swirl ate into the rocks at the heart of the rainy season and as the sun took over, as now, the rocks were exposed, broken teeth of the twisted god, interwoven by contorted roots. Flowering shrubs surrounded the pool into which the cascade settled impatiently before making its exit in a rather reluctant trail down the gentle slope. The evergreen leaves dripped from the fine foam that resulted from the angry splash, rising like vapour.

A group of fierce-looking hunters with arms folded across their chests was gathered around the blackened trunk of a huge aloon tree that sheltered the pool. They were expectant and alert, rarely talking, and nodded in response if they must. Their eyes were blank

and strayed into the distance with no sign of human recognition. On the other side of the pool Asobo-Ntsi was consulting with Ama'a. A short distance away from the two Medakih held a small clay pot besides a shrine.

'Fearless sons of Tengehfheng,' Ama'a called out eventually, approaching the hunters, 'Asobo-Ntsi greets you all!'

Without uttering a word Asobo-Ntsi walked to the shrine and plugged the nkeng leaves from the mouth of the pot. He was dressed in a tiger skin skirt and a similar blouse topped by a feathered skullcap, with a woven chain of fresh ndoup stems around his neck, their leaves like little green butterflies. The vapour from the swirling pool collected on Asobo-Ntsi's exposed arms and then dripped in the sombre space as he gestured in speech. Then Medakih filled his horn after which Ama'a was served. Asobo-Ntsi waved the leaves rhythmically in all directions and sprayed them with a mouthful of wine through his lightly squeezed lips, before nodding at the crowd. Sa'amontoh leapt forward and manoeuvred his way across the stream on a single bridge, to receive the leaves from the Fon. Asobo-Ntsi then scooped camwood paste from a smaller pot and turned toward the fall.

He roared, and his voice rose above the eerie drone. He was himself now, an element from another world, aloof from anything around, animate or not, as his voice rose again and again from unknown depths and seemed to shake the very rocks jutting out above their heads. He was the transfixed creature of his totem already, a lion with the tongue of man, going back through the ages and phases of his incarnation, paying homage to what must not be forgotten, and trembling all the time because even he, animal in human form, could not stand still.

'O, Nyuou Nipen!' he cried, 'twisted child of Tisagli, rooted in Menguoua, I salute you! Isolated guardian of Tengehfheng, twisted from birth because you choose lonely ways, I entreat you!' He was abstract in his utterance, stiff like a spear, unbending. 'Do we not come as expected, great spice-god,' he went on, 'burdened by our usual expectations of the gifts of your pleasure? So I come to you again with your kola and wine and camwood. Share them with your host of invisible guardians then, even from your isolation. Also send Tisagli his bundle and Nikan his bundle and Qwang her bundle, each as they merit, that we may have a rich hunt as you revel in our gifts!'

He paused and looked around in a strange unseeing manner, unblinking. He was not there with his people, and they felt it more than they really knew it; his eyes rolled in the shady light of the grove and even the steady fall of water seemed to be a sustained rhythm under his spell, heavy with a lapping fall.

‘Twisting god with strong and clumsy feet forged in the isolation of your strength, I salute you!’ His voice rang out in undulating echoes as he heaved with effort, desperate summons. ‘Give us your courage to run abroad; give us your sight to pick out the deer from the thicket, and guide our spear into the elephant’s mighty heart. O, Nyuou Nipen, O twisting God with clumsy feet and generous heart, this is our season’s request to you in greetings, that we may live happily in feast and plenty, spiced by your bounty, O stunted God!’

He emptied the remaining wine on the shrine-head and turned to the hunters across the swirling pool. There was a shade of weariness in his eyes, the weariness of one who had travelled to unknown destinations in his sleep and moaned all night, going and returning but trapped to his bed. But his voice, when he spoke again to his people, reverberated with renewed authority, resonant down the wooded valley.

‘Nyen-Mechop!’ he called out, ‘it is you I salute now: have I spoken our wish?’

A chorus of affirmation rose from the other bank, almost mechanical in acquiescence, severally, and almost child-like.

Asobo-Ntsi cocked his head to one side; he was pleased then. It was moments like this that assured him of his ability to lead his people as an almost mystical harmony was struck between them. It was as if the very words he uttered were put into his mouth and came out in a solemn string of testimony when all he wished for was take a breath.

‘Now, where is Ngwatepid?’ he said, turning to Sa’amontoh.

‘Here, Mbe-e!’ a brazen voice came from across the bridge, but solemnly whispery, ‘and on my way.’ He darted across the lone bridge in one athletic leap, his wiry figure dangling momentarily across the space, and took his place beside Sa’amontoh. There was no need to stoop to Asobo-Ntsi now; they were in a sacred realm where manhood was manifested in the temporary negation of courtesy. And Asobo-Ntsi knew it and conceded to them their moment of pride,

and even flattered them, now depending on their own ingenuity. For they were vulnerable still, at such moments, walking paths that were rarely walked and venturing into inhuman circles to capture the royal prize. And how will Asobo-Ntsi not submit to them, tickle them into more than manhood and await his expectations, if he must?

‘Come forward, brave ones,’ he said, ‘come and be shielded. The Gods have heard our request ... they have, yes ... and we will ... we will have another good hunt.’

As he spoke he rubbed the foreheads of the two men with camwood, pausing as if in labour. He was again confronting the unseen, cutting a path through the furthered realms until, gradually, the ritual mood returned again, making him strange once more.

‘Lead our men well, valiant sons of Piegha!’ he commanded. ‘Even the Gods themselves envy your twin-cunning, and who am I to caution and direct? Have you not encountered hazards before, and overcome them for your Fon and the people of Nyen? Let the game confront the grass with tough blade piercing through his eyes and blocking his passage; but you may tread on andoh-ndoh and techopfor, cushions for your sturdy feet in pursuit! You have the blessings of the Gods and my blessings too!’

He was breathing heavily now, in labour.

‘When you are tired,’ he said to Sa’amontoh, repeating the mood of the familiar yearly recital in different words, ‘let Ngwatepid take over the lead, fearless son of Tepid! But beware of the lead animal! I say beware of him, even if you need no caution, for he is more than elephant or deer or antelope, and more than human strength can support; he is animal and not animal, man but more than man. Let him pass on, sluggish in his dignity, for he comes from the abode of cunning ways themselves. It is his burden and pride: Mbah will be amongst you, so beware of the lead animal when he draws out catch home in sluggish dignity!’

He was exhausted, concluding. He should have been used to the challenge of the ritual by now, he kept on telling himself, but every new season seemed to bear a heavier burden and he had to labour like an initiate, weak and uncertain. Age, he concluded, was gradually turning him into a woman without his being aware of it.

He brought out a huge kolanut from his leopard skin bag and shared it amongst them, including Ama’a, who now moved up, following the pattern of the ritual. Then he beckoned on Medakih

who replaced the clay pot on its stand before opening his bag to Asobo-Ntsi who dipped his hands into it and came out with loaves of aja'a kola, whitish after a season's preservation in the ground, carefully wrapped in plantain leaves. He shared it between Sa'amontoh and Ngwatepid. Then he dipped his hands into the bag a second time and turned to the rest of the hunters across the stream.

'Now scramble for your kola, Nyen-Mechop, scramble for your food, pride of the Gods! Never say Asobo-Ntsi sent the dog into the thicket on an empty stomach. It is the token of our love and blessed by the Gods!'

As he hurled successive handfuls of kola across the stream, the hunters went wild with excitement. It was the final moment of the ritual, awaited on taut limbs and always anticipated with anxiety, when they too were drawn into the furl of ceremony, and who will not be jubilant, sharing the rare dish of the Gods? It was the drama that they awaited and enjoyed more than collecting their share.

The bag was empty, and the men had become children pushing and falling over each other in the narrow clearing, to secure a lobe underfoot. There must be something more than just sun-baked potato biscuits in their hunting bags, to spur them on.

Asobo-Ntsi again turned toward Sa'amontoh and Ngwatepid who mechanically stretched out their hands to him. He spat into each palm; the two men rubbed both palms together and then applied them to their faces, arms and feet in slow massaging sequences. As they rose from the slight stoop, already stiff with expectation, Asobo-Ntsi pushed them forward, one after the other, into the pool. They waddled across and clambered out on the opposite bank, cleansed and invincible. Then Sa'amontoh intoned a hunting song, a strained cry coming from somewhere in his stomach, which was picked up by the hunters, emboldened by pride and purpose. They had already forgotten about Asobo-Ntsi and ceremony as they disappeared after the lead hunters around the belly of the sloping hill.

Asobo-Ntsi looked around as if recognizing his environment for the first time. He was relieved, as always, listening to the voices already caught on the hollow rhythm of the Nipen, rising and falling into the distance.

'It is going to be another very long wait,' he said to no one in particular, talking from habit, and already used to the rigours of the after-ritual. 'But we must be patient,' he continued, walking toward

the nearby tree from whose clipped branch he had hung his bag, 'and wait for the sun to break his ridge.'

From the distance they could hear the wild excited chants of the Fon's hunt carried toward them by the wind and echoing through the valleys.

'If Asobo-Ntsi does not kill someone today, he never will!' Khan-Minie said, picking his teeth meticulously: he always did that even after drinking wine, saying that it made him relax and think like a man.

Piembah merely smiled and said nothing. His thoughts were again leaving him and wandering into tracks he did not know, seeking their own solutions.

'The problem with Asobo-Ntsi is that he is too confident,' Piembah heard himself say, responding to some testimony by Khan-Minie, he could not recall what, on royal power.

'Do not forget that he is the lion!' Khan-Minie protested.

'I have never called him a lion,' Piembah said as if it were a self-cleansing remark. His indifference was becoming absolute and Khan-Minie knew they would end up quarrelling if he stubbornly pursued a contrary path. It was all Ndum's fault, he knew, who now spent his time feeding Piembah with wild ideas of how to behave like a man.

'You are right,' Khan-Minie agreed. 'I only call him a lion after my father. All the old men believe that the man is really a lion.'

'Not Ndum,' Piembah smiled mechanically.

'That is true,' his friend remarked, now in an agreeable mood. 'Is that not why he wants to prove to the whole village that the Fon is only a man?'

Piembah nodded, staring into the distance and seeing nothing.

Wonyen was already becoming weary from all the pressure on her. Although she was still to formally accept Nkiuati's son and uncork his wine, it was already clear the way things were moving that she could not deny him. Her father had already uncorked the first

calabash and her own performance was awaited as a natural formality. Her mother now talked to her with much more respect than ever, cautioning and directing her in preparation for her own eventual independence in womanhood. Wonyen had suddenly matured, and felt uneasy, almost ashamed, listening to her mother's advice, night after night when the whole compound was asleep and the two of them stayed up like conspirators doing the final rehearsals before a diabolic act.

'Remember that you carry all your dignity into a man's house,' the mother had said, 'and should never dream of leaving! Our people do not tolerate such behaviour.'

Nkiuati's son was also becoming bolder in his approaches. He had cleared her mother's farms with all the enthusiasm of a favourite in-law. Wonyen had accepted his gifts too, whenever she went to the market, a situation that her relatives exploited rather exaggeratedly. Wonyen almost urged him not to be too generous with them, she was already becoming selfish, but knew too that it was exactly what was expected of every credible suitor. Her mother had even sent her with a special basket for her future mother in-law when her brother's son died. That day she had been introduced to everyone who entered Ma-andoh's house as her jewel.

'Am I not a happy woman now?' she said, dancing in her excitement.

Everyone in the village knew it, and she felt tired out by the weight of expectations on her head. They were all waiting for the day she will uncork Njiuati's wine and cut it before anyone else, including her own father, could taste of it. Already heads turned and fingers pointed in her direction wherever she went and the talking died down to whispers as she moved on with her head stooped if alone.

Too shy to acknowledge her own beauty, Wonyen's humility marked her out the more glaringly, in the words of the villagers, as the woman for a real man.

'She is the battle ground for heroes,' old Ndi-Nkam once remarked, slowly shaking his head in regrets. 'Unfortunately there are no more men in Nyen today! In my era when men were men and knew the value of a woman like Ateh's daughter, but today,' and he had sighed ruefully, 'what is what, any more?'

If only she were less oppressed by her own beauty and her consciousness of expectations she was meant to fulfil, mostly beyond

her will and strength! So she walked on tall and exuberant in her fair complexion brilliance and her elegance lingered behind along her path long after her passage in whispers and sighs. The worst form of torture she experienced ironically came from her father's flamboyant boastings especially when he was drunk.

'Go and eat shit with my pigs,' he challenged, 'Can you father Wonyen?' Then he will sing his own praises all the way home, invoking the spirit of his ancestors in the middle of the night and thanking them for blessing him.

'A non-drinker listening to me will say Mokwang is drunk...' and he sang on, reprimanding himself too, at times, in mbaghelem tones, and staggering into a jig once in a while, in open space.

Once his wives had agreed to scold him.

'You are exposing your own children to witches!' the second wife had said.

To their surprise the man instead went into a fit of laughter.

'Woman, you are really Ndimegha's daughter!' and he laughed again as if in explanation. 'Expose my children to witches? Then they do not know Mokwang. Let anyone touch a seed of my loins and see if she will go down their throats!'

But he began to cajole them, his wives, assuring them. Those who point at his children were only jealous of his breed. Have they not noticed the way his seed was transforming births in Nyen families?

'Look at Moyim's compound,' he said; 'before I offered Wondon to them in marriage to that calabash head of a husband, they were only breeding terrible masks in the form of children. Now Wondon is giving them beautiful children, as they never knew. It is the same thing with Nga-a's family and that of Ngyim. It is my seed woman,' he said generally and laughed again, padding his groin, 'here, that they are after!' The women laughed too in order to hide their shyness, flattered by the implications of his remarks.

'Ask Ateh,' he went on, pointing at his first wife, 'if I paid even half her dowry. And why does her father not disturb me? I am changing the face of his family. It is the same thing with all my in-laws. Let any man who says no show me a face like Wonyen's in his family!' Then he began to hum a mbaghelem tune, closing his eyes and swaying in head in slow motions of revelry, already forgetting the women who, recognising the mood, filed out in silence, smiling in

mutuality.

Wonyen now dreaded going to the farm with only her sister and brother. Her mother's absences these days deprived her of an important sense of security. She knew that Piembah was setting a trap for her assisted by her own brother. But she did not hate Piembah; in fact, after repeated assurances from Ngwikwih, Wonyen was also discovering the other side of the man who wanted her for wife. She could now express herself in his presence and even contradict him without looking away any longer. The only problem was, he was too quiet at times and whenever he chose to talk then he had the air of a man who had everything planned out. He had joked to her of how if she married him he would take her to Mberigham where people ate with Nwuoupang from the same bowl. That was when he started sending her gifts through Ngwikwih.

Her mother was angry at first.

'Never accept kolanut from two men at the same time,' she had cautioned without further explanation. And Wonyen understood, feeling guilty.

Wonyen was forced to lie when the gifts came in too often. It was either meat, which Piembah gave his father's wives and Ngwikwih offered her part of her share; or that it was to be used for preparing Khan-Minie's food. Ateh knew that Piembah's generosity with his catch was no secret. Returning from hunting expeditions or from inspecting his traps he offered huge chunks of meat to people he met on the way, even to strangers so that it was common for one to express his sense of fortune by saying, 'I have met Piembah today' or 'if only Piembah were to cross my path today!' And Ateh remembered what people said, that Asobo-Ntsi was only waiting for him to get married so as to be initiated as one of his professional hunters, those hardened men who often go beyond the boundary of physical awareness. Besides, the woman had concluded in submission, if the meat was indeed meant for Khan-Minie's dish, whoever heard it said that a man oils Asobo-Ntsi's back without rubbing his own shins? Her fears disappeared but Wonyen became increasingly apprehensive in her false declarations.

The sun was already leaning toward Mbekien and Wonyen urged her sister to polish off their last ridge for the day. She had already sent her brother ahead to fetch drinking water.

Asobo-Ntsi released the smoke from sucked-in jowls gradually as if he was afraid to disturb the still air of the Nipen plain. Ndiyzé knew what was running through his mind in that tranced moment when the world seemed to be dead for Asobo-Ntsi. He was certainly making plans and drawing conclusions on some issue or other that was being debated by Ikum-Samba and will simply announce next session that 'as we decided...' And no one would dare to raise a hand in opposition, not even Ndiyzé, his left arm. Was Asobo-Ntsi not Nyen, he would ask almost pleading, and why should Nyen be contradicted when all it implies was the well being of all? His stubbornness was rooted in the belief that, he will not be Asobo-Ntsi if he failed to soothe a weeping child against a hard-fisted parent, or feed a hungry mouth in times of destitution. Responsibility hardened him into an unpredictable thunderbolt, Ndiyzé concluded, even when he shared out gifts and secretly groaned in compassion.

After the departure of the hunting party, Asobo-Ntsi had performed a final rite of gratitude to Nipen, to assure the stunted God that he was not an ungrateful recipient. They had spent some more time there to drain their calabashes, slightly shivering from the frosty interior, before moving to the higher plains where the sun was already licking away the night's dew. A shed, decorated with royal colours, had been erected for their wait. So they sat there drinking and chewing and talking and watching the sun from the lintels of the shed fall away from them. There were moments of brief pauses when Asobo-Ntsi called for his pipe and went into a pensive mood.

At length, when they were almost listless, a trumpet sounded in the distance, distracting the notables.

'They are here, Mbe-el' Ama'a said, hurrying to his feet.

'That is their second announcement,' Asobo-Ntsi said, nodding Cho-Muluh away. 'They are early today.'

He led the two notables out of the shed just as three men appeared against the horizon, the trumpeter in the lead and the other two shouldering what was evidently a big deer, strapped to a long pole. Asobo-Ntsi squinted against the sun and realised that it had already leaned against its climb, breaking away from the path into a

habitual descent.

‘Tsa-apifor!’ the trumpeter said breathlessly and bowing at the same time when they were near enough, ‘your hunters greet you and thank you for making their task easier! And they send us ahead with proof.’

He turned to his companions who deposited their burden on a pile of grass arranged for the initial slaughter.

‘We thank our Gods,’ Asobo-Ntsi said and pulled out his knife from its sheath. He proceeded to methodically carve out the animal into proportionate parts without skinning it. That way the roasting would be easier and manly.

‘Ndiyzé,’ he called out in a ceremonial voice, ‘you preferred crumbs to juicy chunks and we honour you for that. Here is your due,’ and he handed Ndiyzé the left limb together with the pancreas.

‘The baby-sitter does not complain about his share of the food as long as the baby has enough to stop it from crying,’ Ndiyzé said, accepting his share with both hands. ‘I thank Asobo-Ntsi.’

‘Here, Meda,’ he said passing the right limb with tail and the heart to Medakih, ‘this is our share. Ama’a you know what to do now,’ he added and handed the knife to the latter.

It was getting dusk when the royal party descended into the palace. There was already a boisterous stir in the place from the hunters who had been ferrying home the catch as the hunt proved more rewarding.

Chapter Six

But even the rascal son always had his day if only he could shoulder his bride and defy the community that was only too happy to be defied and then rewarded with nightly chunks of roasted and oiled chicken. It was also part of the people's tradition and the anger of in-laws was also an aspect of it. Nyen was one big family of pumpkin stem relations and anger was only anger when it did not insult. Family thieves were always there to initiate and seal the deal and then walk away with their kola, surprised like everyone else that a rascal has played a trick on them.

Wonyen tested the water with her left leg; it was not as cold as she feared. She was bare to the waist with her jigida switching to the rhythm of her hips. She loved her evening baths in the pool below the drinking trough. It was screened from public view by thick flowering shrubs and Wonyen had come to see herself as the evening goddess of the pool. As she squatted in the middle of the shaded area feeling the sandy mud slip between her toes, her jigida spread out above the water in a brief splashy display, before disappearing into the water to form hanging patterns like colourful tendrils around her waist. She also loved to observe these brief transformations of herself reflected in water, thinking how it will feel to be a real goddess of the pool.

She scooped out sticky mud from the low bank and gently rubbed its clayey softness against her wet body. She took her time, tracing every vein and muscle with intimate assurance, and then splashed water all over her body. Then she gathered a handful of foaming leaves and rubbed them together until the foam was enough to cleanse her body. This was the part of her bathing she treasured most, glowing over the slippery touch of her own body against the greenish foam like slime. She always cupped her breasts in both hands and closed her eyes to imagine what it meant to be a mother goddess breast-feeding her baby.

But it was getting late; she always lapsed beyond herself whenever she visited the pool. She quickly rinsed her body, throwing

the fresh water over her shoulder and sucking her breath in momentary shivers as the water fell on her back. She hurriedly scrubbed her heels against the big sandstone on the bank.

Ndum suddenly clutched Piembah's arm.

'She is coming!' he whispered.

Piembah strained to look from his crouching position but Ndum pushed him further into the undergrowth, out of sight.

After enlisting Tella's support that morning to be ready for the fight of his life ('my so is going to win his prize today' was all he kept on saying and Tella understood, or thought he understood) Ndum had joined Piembah and his friend at their habitual spot on the rock and they had finalized their plans: Khan-Minie was to do the rounds of Piembah's traps and Ndum's raffia bush; he was to roast the rat mole with any other he might find, for Mepfure to use in preparing soup for corn-fufu. Then he was to wait for them at Tella's home. Meanwhile Ndum and Piembah were to observe Wonyen and take her at the appropriate moment.

They monitored her and her siblings from a distance; they were already familiar with her homeward routine and had agreed that the moment after her evening bath was ideal. Piembah was growing desperate with impatience; he hated elaborate plans. But Ndum stretched out every detail, went over conclusions again saying, 'You see now, iyeuh, we have to be very sure.' The intimacy between them was almost magnetic.

But as they scaled the hill toward the pool of Wonyen's bath, Piembah suddenly felt unnerved. His heart was again beating faster, and his tongue seemed to have swollen into the whole cavity of his mouth. His legs were sagging under him and it was only the steady trod of his uncle ahead that pulled him on, through the trial of his life.

'You have to be a strongman,' he kept reminding himself; 'this is the moment of your heroism!'

Ndum noticed the silent lapse in Piembah and understood with a cynical smile. It was never easy even for the bravest man to do what has never been done before. He knew his son had a big heart, but Wonyen was not meat that a man could just reach for in the same

way that he will finger his tadpole from the achu' sauce. So he had agreed to take the lead. Piembah was relieved for the moment; he could not imagine himself confronting Wonyen with the brute force that was inevitable in the endeavour, putting on the appearance of a man and fighting against the calling of his own heart.

Then they heard Wonyen moving deftly toward them, her steps hasty and the path opened before her with a switching wave. As she emerged from the arched undergrowth into the small clearing that was a sign that the whole area was soon to be cleared for farming, her mind preoccupied with the preparation of the evening meal, if she was not going to be late, Ndum's smiling presence was just another ordinary encounter on the familiar landscape. She was dimly aware of another figure obscured by the hedges.

'I greet Ndum,' she said casually, stepping aside to let the elderly man pass.

But Ndum did not move, and swayed in a shifting strategy as Wonyen made to move to the other side. He stood in a way that blocked her own passage along the narrow path. Wonyen was alarmed, her heart beginning to race and be clamped at the same time by a sudden fear of the man she had come to recognise as a joking, harmless creature.

'What is it Ndum?' she burst out uncontrollably, overtaken.

'There is no problem,' he said still smiling; 'but you see, my son has told me everything and I wanted to take you home ...'

Wonyen did not want to hear the rest of it; instinct told her what was coming next. The gifts and the sweet talk flashed through her mind and she realised then too that Piembah had been stalking her from a distance for some time now and she was so naïve to think that he was only inspecting his traps! With her right hand firmly holding onto her basket, she tried to break a path with her left. At that moment Ndum realised too that diplomacy must surrender to the wild instinct with no more pretences. In a swift sway he squatted slightly as if to avoid a blow from Wonyen, and with a move like a professional wrestler, grabbed her around the waist and in a neat reposition swung her to his shoulder. The basket flew against a tree and its content scattered all over the place.

Wonyen was already screaming like a possessed spirit summoning her people to come to her rescue. Piembah was dazed, staggering out of the bushes, as Ndum disappeared around a bend at

a fast trot and holding fast to the contorted and jerky wildness of Wonyen. Piembah ran after them not knowing what he was doing, as Wonyen's screams and curses blocked his mind and went straight to his heart like well aimed spears. She was even calling on Nkiuati's son to come to her rescue. And that instead made Piembah furious.

'Why only Ndoh and not me? Am I not man enough for her?'

He quickened his pace, overcome by a fury over his own insufficiency, to catch up with the two and take over his burden. He was determined to demonstrate to Wonyen that he was the man to take care of her, that he was a man who knew how to be responsible, and will not allow anyone stand in his way.

They were now cutting across the Loup plain, taking short cuts and back lanes and already there were a few onlookers attracted by the strident screams. In the mad rush they forgot the stop at Tella's which, as things then stood, would have been unnecessary. Piembah rushed on and overtook Ndum just as he was emerging into the main Ntoh highway.

'Let me help!' he gasped, emboldened by his own fears.

In a flash, Wonyen was roughly hurled onto Piembah's shoulder. He was deaf to her heart-rending pleas and blind to the onlookers who now milled his way, scattering in excitement as he approached. There was only one thing on his mind now, to rush his bride into Ndum's house and await the worst. Her family will come out like angry bees with clubs only after he would have declared his manhood to all, and even enlist his own supporters.

As they swerved into the compound Ndum broke into hilarious ululations.

'Heh heh heei-il' he cried.

'Wuoui!' some of the onlookers responded, already caught up in the drama. For it was what made the rhythm of village life memorable.

But the force of the spontaneous response from his own house took Ndum aback. Anticipating their move, Khan-Minie had already rallied their friends and they rushed out in a welcoming chorus, like women.

After brief consultations it was agreed that Wonyen be taken to Mepfure's house. Ngwikwih who had been lingering around in anticipation was assigned to be her immediate maid. But Wonyen will have nothing of it; she threatened to kill herself and called for her

mother and Ndoh to come and witness the assault on her.

Meanwhile in Ndum's house the animation was of a different type. Piembah's friends were already rattling the *ndœr* rhythm and hobbling in a circle around the fireplace to the *ti, ti tah-tah* beat, already demanding their most obvious prize, the clubs' chicken. Even in a normal ceremony, the chicken could never be contested and today even a child could see trouble brewing in the air. But they were oblivious in their rhapsody, they had what they wanted, and had to defend it. If Nnkaa brought war they were ready to fight, but one thing was clear: Wonyen now belonged to the Ntoh ridge and could not go or be taken back without soiling her dignity. It was a prize that acknowledged their supremacy, they boasted.

'Mother-bride has oiled the bride in patches!' the solo screamed, dragging out toward the end for the chorus to cue in, in a masculine frenzy of drunkenness.

Piembah was suddenly shy, obliterated by the rush of events, facing the taunting slangs from his friends and admirers. They were exposing him, insulting and ridiculing at the same time. Who will teach a child how to eat the elder's meat, they sang, modifying their phrases and improvising, as they deemed necessary. Who will take his seat at Mitanyen now that he must learn to stay at home?

'Piembah has shattered his shin and is bleeding!' the lead singer moaned; 'who will stop the blood from flowing, now that they are all hungry?'

Ndum got the message; they were not yet satisfied. It was their day to ask too and Ndum was still to be described as a stingy fellow. He rushed into his *ntang* and brought out a hen and a cock, which he threw at the feet of the solo, after a brief display of the *ndœr* to a thunderous acclaim.

'When you skip over her tonight,' they sang out to Piembah, 'and skip and skip again seven times, it must be a boy and a girl!'

Chapter Seven

For, in the beginning there was Tisagli, without father and without mother. Then the world began to heave around him...

Charming daughter of the Earth, whose bosom was blessed at the crossroads of Mother Earth's plenitude, Qwang was only too glad to acquiesce to Tisagli's aboriginal winks, heavy with the future and in need of a place to nurse her womb, and diffuse her humus spirit into every leaf and root. Tisagli winked again and she smiled, readying her tadpoles. But Awapie, disgruntled rascal frowned, ha, plagued with the disdain of neglect: for he too, willing consort of Tisagli, had eyed Qwang, and supplicated in expectation, as the peoples braved the misery of migration from all directions. And in a vow of eternal cunning he broke off, huge-muscled scoundrel, and vowed to entrap and maim every dream of the conspiracy against him. He sought for new abode, and found it in the next nook below Tisagli, (above Qwang's pool where the blooms decorated her eyelids with a rainbow flush of foam and the sun); and began to weave rooty nets for the straying tadpoles that should wander from Tisagli's concave toward his mistress.

On his first bridal night, and with Awapie fuming his rage and groaning his woes, Tisagli felt the terrible surge in his loins riot beyond the knowledge of time, felt the thunder too scratch the dark skyline above his abode, the blood that stained the newly formed paths, trickling and soothing; but at dawn the hills were flooded with his mighty discharge, surging into the wooded valleys.

'My abiding plenitude,' he said, crafting responsibility for his staff-bearer, tadpole made man, and the sister cried a bitter shrill and Tisagli said quickly in appeasement, 'child of my loins, even you too, staff to my age, here is your throne, from where you shall pour oil on your brother's stern word, when I shall gather your kind every week today Ngheyu, and feast eternity: so he whispered his desires into the womb of earth and granted, he charmed more of humanity to his abode – the teeming people of Nyen dressed in every tribal hue, to pay him homage with wine and kolanut and camwood; and two small

bundles of salt and two pods of alligator pepper and ndob leaves for the spoiled Gods from his loins – for their own preserve, listening to the rattling of the sun and rain across fronds of his lintel.

And as a caution against the grey days, brother was never to raise fist against brother, let their struggle remain an elbow-confrontation.

Nkiuati was rubbing his feet with boa oil when a furious relative burst into his house to inform him of Wonyen's plight. After returning from the hunt he had sent for his second wife.

'Bring me some water for my bones,' he said when she rushed in expecting a special bundle from the hills.

'How was the hunt today?' she said still hopeful.

'Do what you are told, woman!' Nkiuati barked; 'my bones are rattling in every joint.' As Wotey sneaked out he added, 'And if it is cold again you will drink all of it.'

His wives always said Nkiuati's bathing water could be used to unfeather a hen. He loved to watch the steam rise out of the clay basin, and then he knew his bones would relax in acknowledgement.

He was long in bathing, feeling and massaging every muscle with a thick sponge beaten out of the ngoulang stem. At the same time his mind was going over every heroic detail of the day, every charged cry in pursuit of the game, often harassed into confusion by the manly voices closing in. Asobo-Ntsi must be happy with himself now, he reflected, the way the whole village fawned over him. No one will believe that a few seasons ago he was sneaking in and out of the palace, after the tension that followed his enthronement. He was doing everything to heal the wounds, but the claims of Nnkaa to the throne, Nkiuati concluded, and biting his lower lip instinctively, could never be negotiated. Even Asobo-Ntsi knew the truth only he would not dare to overcome his own manhood in surrender. That was the reason why he was dragging Ama'a into the comfort of his armpit on the pretext that Awa-nkaa was tired, and had already taken two wives from Nnkaa. But he was merely rubbing oil around the wound to drive away the flies, without healing it.

His mind was still occupied with chieftaincy issues when Nkiuati emerged from his ntang girding his ntum around his waist. He pulled his stool toward the glowing fire, which the last son of his first wife always kindled and began applying the fats around his ankles. He rubbed vigorously for some time and then awaited the

crawling sensation, as the fats dissolved into his bones and engaged in battle with what he was convinced were little worms wriggling through his joints, almost tickling.

‘Yeeiii! Yeeiii!’ a female voice sputtered from outside.

Nkiuati paused in his medication and listened.

‘Is Nkiuati at home?’ the voice called.

‘I am at home; what is the matter?’ Nkiuati knew the voice; it was Sirri-Penn, Ama’a’s first wife.

‘The father of these children,’ she said squatting, ‘something heavier than my tongue can carry has happened!’

‘Tell me then, I am listening.’

Nkiuati always felt intimidated by impatience when dealing with women. He hated them with their tactic of dragging a story all over the village before bringing it home. Now his wives were already crowding around the door and stretching out their necks like famished vultures in the dry season.

‘Ndimbah has rubbed watery shit on Nkiuati’s head!’ Sirri-Penn announced in a mournful voice.

‘I still do not get you woman. What has he done to me?’ He was as composed as ever but his mind was already abroad in wild speculations and arriving at nothing, suspended. He and Ndimbah had been on the hills together and at times chased the same game and even exchanged strategies on how to overtake it.

‘Ndimbah sent his brother to snatch our son’s wife!’ she cried, wriggling in her squatted position. ‘Wonyen is now Piembah’s bride!’

There was silence in the room. Even the women, who had filed in and were struggling to squeeze their straying babies between their legs, stared at Sirri-Penn with open mouths. It was at such moments too that Nkiuati felt all his energy rushing back into the composed posture of a boa constrictor about to strike. He stared ahead and across the room at the opposite wall, seeing nothing but his own mingling thoughts suddenly entangled around each other.

Then he caught the sound of whimpering at the door, gushing forth in constrained bursts as if from a distance.

‘I knew, ill-fated woman that I am!’ It was Menyi, Ndoh’s mother. ‘I knew I could never sit among my age mates and laugh like the rest. What have I done to deserve this, someone should tell me!’ she lamented, calling on her dead mother over and over. She had

been cursed, she wept, never to smile like every other woman. What crime had she committed against Ndimbah and his brother, someone should tell her.

‘Silence, woman!’ Nkiuati barked; ‘who has died in my compound that you must summon the whole of Nyen here?’ He cast an intimidating look around, daring any other snivelling sympathizer. Then he wanted to know how Sirri-Penn came by such intelligence.

‘Nkiuati,’ Sirri-Penn said defensively, ‘I cannot bear such heavy message if I only heard it from someone. I saw it with my own eyes on the way from the farm. It was Ndum who bore her on his shoulder and Wonyen was screaming like you never heard a miserable child cry before, and kicking. But Ndum was twisting her arms and pulling her hair – poor child! – while the young rascal himself, Piembah, was struggling to tie her legs together with thick ndoup.’

She was breathing heavily, excited by the drama of narrating her story, even enjoying the momentary attention paid her. Let those who say Sirri-Penn talks a lot and invent stories contradict her now, if she did not witness all this!

Menyi could not suppress her emotions for long, listening to the eyewitness assault against her daughter in-law.

‘You hear now!’ she whispered tearfully; ‘it is my own shameful reward ...’

Nkiuati glared at her and the remaining words died in her throat. She slipped out of the house muttering to herself in choking sounds. One of her mates, Awah-Mengie, followed her; they never could be sure what a hurt mother in-law would do to herself in desperation.

‘I thank you Sirri-Penn for letting me know as soon as possible,’ Nkiuati said calmly. ‘Is Ndoh back?’ he asked.

‘No,’ someone said.

Nkiuati was not surprised. Ndoh had left at cockcrow with four of his friends to the distant market beyond Ndanshi where Nwuoupang’s goods were sold. They usually carried kola nuts and smoked meat, which they exchanged at a gross disadvantage without caring, with the rare niceties of Nwuoupang. But now that Ndoh was thinking of bringing his wife home, he had invited two of his friends to accompany him with his excess luggage. He wanted so much to offer Wonyen a piece of cloth similar to the one which Mafor

wrapped around her waist in huge colourful folds.

‘Ask him to meet me in Awa-nkaa’s house to decide whether and how Nyen will ever know peace again,’ Nkiuati said and left after hastily dressing, without another word.

The first cocks of the night were beginning to crow when Ndoh rushed into Awa-nkaa’s house, ready for combat. His sister had stayed up to wait for his return so as to inform him of his misfortune before he got it from anyone else. People always said there was a piece of Nkiuati in Ndoh’s demeanour whenever he was under stress. He listened to his sister and like a dumb he handed the neatly wrapped bundle to her and stood for a while as if uncertain about his next move. He had barely been whispering with his sister, but it was enough to wake their mother.

‘Is he back?’ she called from the darkness of her ntang, unsure of how to approach him. Ever since Ndoh’s formal engagement she no longer called him by name, realising all of a sudden that her child was already abstracted into elusive manhood, inevitably, like all men. It was always, ‘He is coming’ or ‘He is calling for you,’ and everybody understood. It was a deference which she herself had used in reference to her husband in the early days of her marriage when something seemed to block her throat whenever she wanted to pronounce Nkiuati’s name, long before he succeeded his father and took the more formal and ceremonial name. Then when the children came, he became a prefixed personality, Ndi, to the particular child’s name.

Ndoh went back to his newly built house and for the first time felt as if the cow dung and ash plastered walls were staring at him with unutterable questions. In the dimness of the glowing coals everything looked spectral, the walls themselves seemed to incline toward him with mute queries, and the shelves with pots and bowls, all of which may never be used, and the gigantic water pot positioned on a clay mound in the corner.

Suddenly despondent but still focused, Ndoh stooped into his ntang recalling the plans he had weaved every day in anticipation of his new life. He had told his friends that the present structure was just temporary; all he had to do for now was to cross the main hall

into the ntang opposite his own to meet Wonyen. But he planned to build his own house when the rains finally stopped, to save him the horror of seeing what a man's eyes must not see.

He groped in the dark for his ceremonial machete, which his father had offered him after his initiation rites. Then he brought out the small calabash of nstop and tipped a bit into his left palm. He licked it dry, thankful that Nkiuati was not there to reprimand him for violating the sacred potion whose powers are always controlled by palm oil. Then he rubbed his arms with the remaining bits in his palm and was ready to go. He was taking no chances. If his father was with Awa-nkaa and had left word for him to join them, then he must not go there like a woman. He first passed through his friend, Pizié, to inform him of the recent development. He found the latter poised over a mound of achu'.

'Meet me in Awa-nkaa's compound,' Ndoh said in greeting, pausing at the door and about to retreat into the dark night.

'What is wrong?' Pizié gurgled, alarmed.

'Ndimbah has caught a porcupine with his bare hands,' Ndoh said, 'and a man will die because of it; inform Ndzéné.' And he was gone.

There was an impressive crowd of Nnkaa elders in Awa-nkaa's house when Ndoh stooped at the door. One look at him told the elders that their worst fears have been confirmed.

'Come and sit here, my son,' Awa-nkaa said, husky with age.

Someone pulled a stool for him. Ndoh hesitated; he did not expect to see Nnkaa elders gathered around the fire drinking and talking and chewing kola. He felt a momentary sense of betrayal, even his own father seemed to have abandoned him in his supreme moment of dependence.

He sat down reluctantly and took in the group in a slow look.

'Will someone explain to me what is going on here?' he said in a strained, palpitating voice.

'I am glad you came like a true son of Awa-nkaa,' the old man continued after an awkward silence as if he did not get Ndoh's question. 'If I am to sleep tonight and not get up in the morning I will still be happy that I have seen my own sons grow from my loins into bearded men.' He was labouring between exhaustion and coughing, dragging himself out to the limits and the veins stood out in his neck, taut with strain. He paused at intervals to catch his breath

or let a coughing fit subside in the silence of the attentive room.

‘My people have again been insulted,’ Awa-nkaa was saying, talking as if to some presence beyond the room, but with his dull watery eyes fixed on Ndoh, ‘and who shall accuse me of impatience? Who shall say I was not tolerant enough if he were to be told my story? The humiliation that I have borne on this head,’ he said pulling off his skullcap to reveal an almost bare scalp with grey tufts of hair fringing the corners of his warped ears, ‘is enough to make my generations mourn forever. But no one shall accuse Awa-nkaa of impatience. So I asked you to sit down my son, like your fathers have done at my bidding for over twenty rains now. They would only fight when Awa-nkaa can no longer bear this thorny stool of humiliation.’

There were resigned looks of approval all around the smoky enclosure.

‘What about my wife then?’ Ndoh said in a strangled voice.

‘He has not followed my voice,’ Awa-nkaa said with a strange ironic smile. ‘Ama’a, talk to him.’

He was silent and leaned against the plaited bamboo wall partially screening the bed behind him.

‘It is true what Awa-nkaa has said,’ Ama’a began tentatively. Nkiuati had stopped at his place, and after listening to the two, Awa-nkaa had immediately convened the meeting. It was now a Nnkaa fight and no one prepares for war without consulting with his people, the old man had said. ‘It is also true that our wife is now in Ndimbah’s compound,’ Ama’a was saying, ‘but we will not fight until we hear from his own mouth why he had to do this to us and behind our back. We will also send a delegation to Asobo-Ntsi in the morning to know if he has heard of the insult on Nnkaa and what he thinks of it.’

He paused suddenly. There were footsteps outside approaching, and suspicious looks crisscrossed the room.

‘It is Ndzéné and Pizié,’ Ndoh said without looking up. He sounded gloomy and bored. Almost immediately the two stooped in and greeted.

‘Are you in?’ they greeted in a chorus.

‘I see that all of Nnkaa is awake tonight,’ Ama’a laughed. Stools were provided for the two who squeezed themselves behind some elders.

‘What do we do?’ It was Ndzéné, always ready for challenges,

and plunged into a fight as the elders said of him, before asking to know the combatants.

‘Nothing,’ Nkiuati said generally, but talking to his son. This was his burden as a father and his son was to be out of it. ‘It is not yet your time to fight,’ he added with a sense of responsibility. He knew too that he was talking for Nnkaa and had to choose his words with tact. ‘Awa-nkaa has spoken and we have listened with both ears. Tomorrow morning Ndofouh and Ntahpong will take his fig leaf to Asobo-Ntsi. It is our hope that tomorrow evening we will again assemble here to feast over our meat from the palace.’

It was decided and Nkiuati had said it like a man who always surveyed both ends of the snake before hitting it, if he must. The problem was the younger men, with full hearts that were beating for action, unwilling to be restrained.

‘We cannot change the ways in which we have always done things,’ Awa-nkaa said from behind his lids, sensing the stiffness in the air. He sounded like an oracle rushing through the owl-hooting night with a word of caution before men could no longer be restrained.

Chapter Eight

Tella'a listened and strained and listened, and the fading voice again revived on sacred knowledge: 'Where the path leads, men must follow, and plant a fig as they move on, that those coming after them may not miss the way'. Tella'a had listened still, condemned by some force to listen, and burdened to bear the scar of the uttered mystery. It made him restive, and wondered again if he were going to die by surviving the old man or survive by preceding him to the ancestral plane? Deliverance, it seemed, was in utterance, and he again heard the words coming from mysteryland, that history has many voices and those who remember lack the courage to sing a tune...

Asobo-Ntsi rushed into the inner courtyard like a wild bee ready to sting anyone foolish enough to wander around its hive. He was beyond himself with agitation and seemed to dance on the same spot in an attempt to rush ahead of his steps, talk and give instructions at the same time. Ndiyzé trailed him like a shadow, followed by Mecham and Ndindoh.

'How can I ever live with such an abomination!' Asobo-Ntsi said in a gush and slumped onto his stool.

Ndofouh and Ntahpong whose arrival and consequent announcement had brought out Asobo-Ntsi from his privacy, stooped and clapped their greetings. Asobo-Ntsi had been screaming at his two notables all morning over the issue of Nkiuati's wife, having been alerted by Tongari and after which Ndindoh was sent out to summon Ndiyzé and Mecham. Awa-nkaa had sent them with a fig leaf, which they presented to Asobo-Ntsi with muttering respect.

Asobo-Ntsi regarded the leaf for a long time as if he expected it to utter some secret code for his own deliverance.

'Now, what do I say?' Asobo-Ntsi said in exasperation, 'what do I say to Awa-nkaa? Who ever heard of such an abomination in Nyen, that a son from royal loins would seize the bride of another?'

'Never Mbe-e, never heard of such before,' Ndindoh said almost in self-vindication. He had long concluded that the way

Asobo-Ntsi talked made everyone guilty.

'These children of today, Mbe-e,' Mecham ventured in a lame consolation, not sure of what to say, 'they will soon bring home an animal with two heads.'

'Children!' Asobo-Ntsi screamed, seizing the cue, 'you call Piembah a child? Then he should not bite into meat not meant for children!'

His eyes glittered with raw fury. He was strange and unapproachable, speaking like a bowed instinct. A new spark came into his eyes as Medakih rushed in breathlessly, covered with dew from the waist.

'You are alone!' Asobo-Ntsi barked at him

'He is on my heels, 'Tsa-apifor,' Medakih said in gasping snaps. He had been running as if to spite Asobo-Ntsi, and had not rested until he was ascending the hill that led into Ndimbah's compound from the palace.

'Let him come and wipe away his own shit,' Asobo-Ntsi said in a pacifying tone. 'Now what will Nkuiati think? And what do I tell Awa-nkaa?' He was overcome by his own sense of remorse, suddenly made impotent by the gravity of such shame. 'What would Nkuiati say?' Asobo-Ntsi repeated as if that were the very answer he needed.

'He did right not to come himself,' Ndiyzé said quietly; 'a man with anger in his heart should allow others to talk for him.'

'Quite true,' Mecham said, no longer sure of anything; 'he should put his words into the mouths of others.'

Ndimbah slouched in dripping and humbled like a beaten dog.

'Here I am, Mbe-e!' he said, stooping and gently clapping. He straightened up and looked around uneasily; 'but 'Tsa-apifor should not see my muddy feet. Medakih met me in the raffia bush,' he explained.

'Asobo-Ntsi has not invited you to feast, Ndimbah,' the Fon said in a suddenly calm, assuring voice. It was always this deceitful guise that disturbed those who have to stand before him, when he was about to strike. 'Tell me,' he continued, 'why have you insulted Nkuiati, knowing that it is a thing not to be done?'

Ndimbah's mouth fell open and he again looked round in frantic confusion like a cornered squirrel and realised the composition of the company for the first time.

‘Speak out, or must I force your mouth open?’ Asobo-Ntsi was almost getting to his feet, his eyes beginning to roll as Ndimbah still lingered in his confusion.

‘I ... I am lost, Tsa-apifor,’ he stammered, lifting his hands in a desperate gesture; ‘I do not follow Mbe-e’s tongue.’

‘Do you then say Asobo-Ntsi is mad, you scoundrel! Who is mad that you do not understand him?’ Asobo-Ntsi towered to his feet in his agitation, trembling and just as suddenly Ndimbah stooped in humble submission.

‘He did not mean that you are mad, Mbe-e, the Gods forbid that!’ Ndiyzé said softly. It was his burden to drag Asobo-Ntsi back to the road whenever he strayed into the bushes. ‘I think Ndimbah does not know what has happened,’ he said, pathetically shaking his head at the stooped figure before Asobo-Ntsi.

‘Then he should never call himself a man if he does not know what is going on in his house!’ Asobo-Ntsi sloped back onto his stool like a man giving up.

Mecham came forward. Ndimbah was his friend and age mate, and he had always respected his judgement and knew that things were not the way they should be in this case.

‘Piembah has snatched the wife of Nkiuati’s son,’ he declared.

‘May Tisagli forbid!’ Ndimbah cried and further prostrated himself in front of Asobo-Ntsi. ‘Tsa-apifor, if ever I dreamed of such filth, let me suffer your royal curse immediately!’ He will never be party to such atrocity, he implored, who does not know his friendship with Nkiuati? Only yesterday they shared royal lobes around the Menguoua cove as they awaited the deer that were scaling the slope and how can you share kola with a man and carry evil in your heart against him?

‘I knew that boy was going to bring rotten meat home when he chose his own hill without consulting me.’ He was slightly sitting up now and talking without pause.

Asobo-Ntsi’s face was a bit relaxed but his heart was still closed to any human supplication.

‘Sit up, Ndimbah,’ he said, apart from himself.

‘I am comfortable like this Mbe-e. Let me lie under your wrath until I am cleared of this!’

‘Be it as you say. So what happened in your compound last night?’ It was unlike Asobo-Ntsi to be so soft, almost conciliatory.

'May be Tsa-apifor was right to say that I am not man enough to look into my compound and know what is going on,' Ndimbah admitted, the mournful sound coming back into his voice. When he left the palace last night, satisfied with Asobo-Ntis's favours, he had passed through Atamndu's compound on the fringes of the village, to condole with him, as every good in-law should, following the death of his second wife. Some mourners were already snoring in their corners when he came in. Ma-Achu, Piembah's mother, fed him well, and Tsa-apifor can understand why he decided to spend the night with his friend and in-law. He slept like a log, but got up very early for his raffia bush in the Ntinipen valley especially as he skipped last night.

'That is where Medakih found me, Mbe-e,' he concluded.

He was almost sobbing in submission, making pathetic gestures. He knew his manhood was tarnished, how could Nkiuati ever believe his innocence? He was ready to pad Asobo-Ntsi's feet in his acquittal, he implored the rigid looks.

At that moment Piembah was dragged into the hall by two guards. He disentangled himself from their grip as soon as they came in and stood apart like a piece of darkness, engulfed by his own unfathomable nature, frowning. His arms were folded across his chest in defiance, his thick lips hardened black by the morning cold showed rebuff in their very folds. In his own heart he could not endure the humiliation against him on the first morning of his real manhood and so silently cursed the day he knew Asobo-Ntsi.

Ndimbah turned around slowly in his posture and stared at his son with a mixture of anger and wonder. But it was a complete stranger that stood there hooded by his own instinctive presence in a dark confrontation, not even caring to recognise the royal presence.

'Mbe-e,' the father said, 'my son ...'

'Enough, Ndimbah!' Asobo-Ntsi stammered, 'he is no longer your son, can you not see? He is now a man with a hairy groin, ready to confront and challenge Asobo-Ntsi.'

He was talking through his teeth, biting off his words into a fierce whisper with the bitterness that even his enemies dreaded. He was talking like a disturbed spirit with no feeling, only spitting out blunt words against the object of his agony.

'Look at him,' he growled, 'a beast not even fit to be a slave to Nwuoupang. We abandoned the real child after birth and instead

picked and nursed the sitter.' It was rare for Asobo-Ntsi to show regret even for another's woes, but even that was only tactical. 'Where have you hidden Nkiuati's wife?' he spat out.

There was silence as every face was focused on Piembah's. But he was unmoved, a wooden statue fixed in arrogance by the evil claws of Awapie; his head was bowed in a stiff rebuff. Ndimbah struggled up to him as if against a dark thing and at the same time Piembah looked up, stared at the miserable old man with unknowing eyes and then looked away at the opposite wall.

'Ndimbah,' Asobo-Ntsi said, the strange, preying calmness coming back into his voice like the steel blade that always hung around his waist, 'stay out of this! Nobody should get between Asobo-Ntsi and his enemy!' He turned to Piembah again as Ndimbah sadly shook his head in retreat, suddenly old.

'Where have you hidden Wonyen?'

'I am not hiding her, Mbe-e; she is my wife.' He was mocking Asobo-Ntsi, laughing in his heart and celebrating his manhood all of a sudden.

'Your wife! Do you hear the beast!' Asobo-Ntsi was screaming, forgetting royalty and regaining the animal composure. It was as if he wanted this confrontation, to be himself again in the excitement of conflict, crouching a bit as if he were about to pounce. It was always said that he would not be happy unless someone was complaining of stomachache in Nyen. He was happy then, they said, observing the twisted faces or else rushed beyond himself to seek an atmosphere of defiance, even against himself, when his eyes dazzled with blood as now, fixed on Piembah.

'I curse ...' he sputtered.

But Mecham rushed up in supplication. Piembah's mother was from his house and Tsa-apifor should relent a bit and listen to the boy.

'For what?' Asobo-Ntsi said; 'he did not even respect his own father enough to inform him of what was going on. Have you ever heard of such filth?'

'Never Mbe-e, never!'

'He has soiled the royal bed and must be lost from my sight.'

He turned around in a semi-circle as if searching for himself and turned again on Mecham, his eyes bright with emotion.

'I ask you Mecham, have you ever heard of it in Nyen?' he

breathed and because the other shook his head frantically, he continued: 'then why do you want me to thank Piembah and give him my throne ... yes, that is what you want,' he reiterated as Mecham made to protest vigorously, 'except Asobo-Ntsi is again a liar! Did we ever dream of this, that a child of the palace would seize the wife of another prince?'

Asobo-Ntsi had worked himself into the appropriate state in which everybody was spellbound watching him, and could not afford neutrality. Even Ndofoh and Ntahpong shook their heads in acknowledgement of the truth of what Asobo-Ntsi said. Nyen had had troubles both from her people and her enemies, but, always, it was their moral sense of purpose that held them together, in triumph, at last.

'Mmahshi will not even have the courage to cleanse this,' Asobo-Ntsi was saying, referring to the royal herbalist. Then he turned again to Piembah with a solemn declaration, 'Before the sun goes down you must take her back to her father's house. Then we will decide on your punishment.'

'She is my wife, Mbe-e,' Piembah said as calm as ever; 'I cannot take her to where she no longer belongs. Is snatching not a Nyen tradition?' He was almost smiling in his challenge.

Ndiyzé stirred himself into words; a house is never allowed to burn to ashes while men watch. He had allowed Mecham to talk because he had confidence in the man's words. But it was becoming clear that Asobo-Ntsi was rushing beyond every retainer and so he had to step in.

'Asobo-Ntsi,' he said in his soft hypnotic way, very formal, 'you do not carry a flame to put out the fire which a stubborn child has set on your house. When we beat a child we do not drive him outside into the night; instead we push him under the bed as a caution.' He paused as Asobo-Ntsi went back to the royal stool. Even Ndiyzé subdued the lion! Then the elder turned to Piembah in his slow, methodical sway. 'Son,' he said, 'if it is true that you have seized your brother's piece of meat then you have done what has never been done before in Nyen. When a man wants to be a rascal he snatches his wife on whose head a drink has not been shared, and then pleads with his in-laws after. And we all drink and dance and laugh because it is a part of our tradition that makes us to laugh at ourselves. But it is a terrible thing when montoh snatches the bride of another. But we

can still carry sacrifices to the Gods.'

'I thank you Ndiyzé,' Piembah said; 'I understand you but the problem is, nobody wants to understand me! Is it that I am not strong enough to deserve a fair woman like Wonyen as the mother of my children? Is it not a fight that only the strongman should take her home?'

Asobo-Ntsi was clearly fighting with himself, listening to Piembah. His patience had never before been stretched out in this manner. He felt as if the boy was strangling him with his words, choking him with his boastful affront. Even Ndimbah was surprised at the sudden boldness in his son. In normal times he would be proud of him, as he tried to defend a manly position. He would have re-filled his son's horn and said, 'You spoke like a man, my son; let me serve you!' But it was not the case and the humiliation was such that he did not know where to run and hide his head.

'Still you did wrong my son,' Ndiyzé was saying, soft as ever, with no effort behind his words.

'That is what the elders of Nyen say,' Piembah countered. 'If I was wrong Wonyen would have told me, but she accepted my gifts, Ndiyzé, and sent me food and greetings.'

'If she did that,' Ndiyzé said beginning to betray what appeared like impatience, 'then it was out of ignorance; ignorance about the ways of our people and ignorance about your real intentions. A girl never talks for herself, child, her parents do. Same with the boy. You harvested pears that belonged to someone else. You should have informed Ndimbah for him to make proper inquiries on your behalf.'

'There was no time,' Piembah said without further explanation. It was clear that he was more comfortable with this way of dragging out the matter even if it led nowhere.

'You must take her back then, now that you know and there is still time. You do not go hunting behind your house son; you may hit your own dog.'

'But she belongs to me now,' Piembah cried in a pathetic voice, childlike. 'Why do you want to take my prize and give it to someone who cannot even pull a punch without his father supporting his arm? I have fought for her in silence and now she belongs to me in public.'

'Belongs to you!' Asobo-Ntsi thundered, hitting the floor

with the tail of his fly whip. The instinct for brutality possessed him anew and he danced on the spot like a possessed spirit. 'Have we become dogs so suddenly? What will Awa-nkaa's people say?' And he turned toward the two messengers and then back to Piembah. 'Tell Ndofouh and Ntahpong that Asobo-Ntsi has become a woman and even a child with his nose still running can now stand up and beat his chest before me and say, 'Yes, I did it, what can you do to me?''

He spun around on the royal stool as he spoke, mournful.

'In the days when Nkhefor will not let our people sleep in peace,' he continued, 'we understood. It was a force beyond us, opposed to our collective intrusion. But all we sought was a homeland where we could settle, farm, sleep in peace, procreate, and watch our children grow. But Nkhefor will not have us, he wanted us to leave overnight or stay and become his slaves. And we did what we did'

It was again a voice from afar reaching the small group with the potency of fate. Nobody could deny it, the truth of Asobo-Ntsi's reminiscence, how their differences which he was again recalling with emphatic caution, suddenly became a symbol of their strength and Tenghehfeng's loins were burdened to bequeath the liberator. He had given them a homeland, and a place to procreate; now they needed a future. They had to agree in the end in order to survive when the conscripting reign of Nkhefor ended like a myth in a spiked pit, the groans of which still echoed lowly places when the Gods of Nyen were happy. Then their voice rose in unison with the morning sun, stretching to their imagined boundaries and furthering the roots of a seed that could not be uprooted without the visitations of doom, on the people. Their survival, ever since, as a people, was a matter of agreement. And now a rat threatened him, Asobo-Ntsi lamented, a child with his nose still running. It will never happen while he lived.

'Disappear from my sight, you beast!' he howled, 'and cursed be the day you shall ever step into this courtyard again!'

He was already up and at the rear door before anyone understood him but paused and seemed to recall something, the way he looked at the men from Nnkaa. Then he decided otherwise and stormed out pursued by the disconcerted entourage. His curses could be heard even as he disappeared into the palace.

The two men from Nnkaa exchanged glances as if to say, 'Did I not tell you? I know them!' But they were frustrated too in

their abandonment, not sure of what message Asobo-Ntsi wanted them to take back to Awa-nkaa. But it was not for them to ask: the fig leaf was never despised with silence. Their whispers, like subdued grunts, targeted Asobo-Ntsi, his arrogance in questioning the recalcitrant child, in concession, as if they were ignorant about his real wish. It has always been the lot of Nnkaa to suffer the stigma of shame because there were no men in Nnkaa to stand up and save them from repeated insults. If Piembah had deprived Nnkaa of her wife, was Asobo-Ntsi not the first to have deprived them of their most cherished prize, the throne?

They barely followed the father-child talk at the main door, going out. Ndimbah was lamenting his sudden woes. How was he to move among his people now with his feather still on?

‘You have put me out of favour with Asobo-Ntsi son,’ he said. ‘Only yesterday I ran after deer across nine hills and did not feel any pain from my sore feet because my heart was filled with pride in anticipation of the royal balm. But today I cannot raise my head in the crowd any more like a man!’

But Piembah was not listening. He only lingered on to give his own thoughts some scope. In his heart he was already a man capable of making decisions for himself and his new family.

‘I put nobody out of favour with Asobo-Ntsi except myself,’ and he sauntered away out of his father’s sight.

Ndimbah felt for a stool along the outer wall and sat down. He was dazed and seemed to have reached the end of his own road, weak and vulnerable, and there was no kinsman to hold his hand and lead him back home. He was caught in the shrubs of his own misery and the farewell salute of Ndofouh and Ntahpong came faintly to his ears. He knew that they too were leaving, everybody was suddenly leaving, avoiding him as if he were a leaper. To stand in the shadow of Asobo-Ntsi’s anger was a miserable experience. He was in a desperate dream fighting, but could not free his limbs to respond to the stimulus of his heart. He struggled after the receding voices, drowsy; his mind was still alive following their every whisper, but his reflexes had abandoned him. So he crawled after them as if in one last struggle for his life and called out in a faint voice that he could never recognise as belonging to him. But they heard him and stopped and looked back in disdain, Ndimbah concluded, walking toward them like a discarded shadow of himself.

‘We thought you were resting a bit,’ Ntahpong said. That was the insult he expected to be thrown at him, Ndimbah sobbed in his heart. How could they say that when they knew it was not true? Only yesterday, ahh! Did they not share royal excitement only yesterday after the game and exchanged victorious salutations across the bushy ridges? But now they must insult him and say he needed rest simply because his stride of pride has been cut in mid-step; he Ndimbah, whose fists were known to crack the neck bone of the antelope in a quick acrobatic twist, now must rest and be mocked by weaklings.

‘Now that you know the truth,’ he said like a man who had nothing to hide, ‘tell Nkiuati that I greet him with the courage of a coward who does not deserve to live among men.’

‘It is your son, Ndimbah,’ Ndofoh said, ‘we do not blame you.’

‘And your brother too,’ Ntahpong added as if he needed to be reminded, Ndimbah thought, shaking his head.

‘No,’ he said, ‘it is the family name that has done this to Nkiuati and today I am the one carrying that name.’ He reflected for a moment and then added, heavily, ‘and the stain will stay forever.’

Then he turned and walked in the opposite direction, his head in a stiff bow.

Ndofoh and Ntahpong continued on their path, silent with their thoughts. Ndofoh’s straddling feet hit the edges of the path as he walked; he seemed to rake his way, his heels almost touching. He could go nowhere stealthily, his friends mocked him, but Ndofoh was never one to lie down and take a second knock.

‘Who amongst us draws the greatest applause during the mbaghelem?’ he countered; ‘my feet were made for the dance arena and not for stealthy expeditions.’

And it was true, Ntahpong now reflected, listening to the wrestling footfalls behind him and expecting their owner to stagger and crash into him any moment even as they climbed the Sware’nkaa slope.

‘I have been thinking,’ Ndofoh panted, ‘but still do not know what we will tell Awa-nkaa.’

Ntahpong stopped under a cluster of tall banana stems that formed a hedge over them and leaned on his staff.

‘What else can we say?’ he said; ‘you saw the shy look in Asobo-Ntsi’s eyes. What else do you want us to tell Awa-nkaa?’

Wonyen no longer belongs to us.'

They continued in silence along their path that wound around the slope like their own thoughts, overcome by the burden of their mission.

Ndiyzé staffed his way home in a stooped posture, meditating over his own life that unfolded in strings of compromise and concession. But he was a victim of what had been decided in the absence of his own choice, long ago when the grandfather of his father's father devised the plot that ruined Nkhefor. He, the man, was the victim of a name, which was heavier than Mamben; he could not alter what had been decided, and on which all of Nyen now depended. He was condemned to rub balm on every wound, even when he should turn away in denunciation. How could it be otherwise when his own father had spat everything into his palms in sacred revelations of a magical frontier unfolding the fate of a people condemned to speak with one mouth and eat from the same bowl and drink from the same horn? It was his burden then not to complain in his task as balm-bearer, he resolved, feeling the hard lump of camwood in his bag, to be transformed at any moment into the paste of concession and of peace, making amends to the injured party. That was his burden, and whoever heard of a messenger who turned down his errand and instead boasted over the priorities of his own thoughts?

He had done so much for Asobo-Ntsi and for Nyen, Ndiyzé admitted, spitting out tobacco chaff he had been chewing all morning. It was his habitual diversion whenever he was in the mood to meditate without appearing to do so, rolling the pepperish lump between his gums and lower lip and feeling a thaw to his spirits.

The burden of the people's fears was reverting onto his shoulders with every step he took and the more he thought about it, the more convinced Ndiyzé became that he alone held the solution to the land's problems, right from the beginning; he alone could have pacified the conflicting hearts striving to tower against each other. Was he not the one chosen to lead them in the jubilations following the death of Nkhefor? Was he not to be the guarantor of the people's future, enthroning Fon after Fon and ensuring stability with the humility of the beginning? The years rolled on and around his

thoughts, recalled and straightened out, polishing, effacing facts and admitting weaknesses, even failures. He had to confront the truth of the years wrapped around his thoughts with the tenacity of an angry python, calling for admission.

But he knew too that he could not accept the will of the people without destroying a part of himself, his own will that refused personal acclaims. His was a benevolent preference that ignored other choices, and appropriated no individual gains when the supreme interest of the people was at stake. The shadow of a smile lingered around his lips in recollection of the transformation his own inherited name had undergone in surveillance of his disinterested desire at a crucial moment in the life of the village. Did his father not confess that people had called him a fool and others vowed he was merely pretending, when his real interest was to have what he was refusing? But they were those who did not know him, and the things that pleased him, even today after the revelations of time had laden him with the consciousness of collective mystery. How could he continue to bear Ndiyzé at a moment when he was already through with the obligation of feeding royalty? Did Asobo-Ntsi and his father before him not wax like possessed spirits from the fruitage of his breed, even long before him, Ndiyzé, warming the royal chambers? That had been his humble responsibility too when succulent maidens from his family seduced royal loins into tense manhood as if bewitched. And who could blame him in his pride or even dare to accuse him of scheming loyalties when he relieved royalty of its suffering? It was his luck, simply, to be the one whose family in all of Nyen weaved royal beads in a semi-circle of fertile maternity during Ilérè, flourishing the oiled glamour of virginity in dark shiny folds, unperturbed by the fears of shameful discoveries. Perhaps he was fortunate too to know how to make use of what the Gods had placed on the threshold of his compound and why should he not dance in his exuberance?

Still, he had to talk to Asobo-Ntsi before the Fon tumbled the entire village down the Qwang falls. He was driving himself and the whole place into a frenzy and the people could be tired of him and his ways too soon. That was Ndiyzé's fears, when the village will turn to him for a solution. He too was beginning to feel the pressure of the years in his joints and Asobo-Ntsi's actions and attitude only made him more desperate. It were time, following his preference,

generations ago, to now relapse in the quietness of his achievements and live the real meaning of his new name avowed with his own spiritual metamorphosis. He was no longer the giver, but the receiver, rewarded for his generosity in times of royal desperation. And with that should come calm winds for the consummation of his achievements with Nyen.

These thoughts crowded his mind as his weak steps hastened home. Ndiyzé could feel the spirits of the beginning at his heels, in pursuit, and knew that he could not just sit and fold his arms and watch the land fall into a chaos of too much manliness. Yes, Asobo-Ntsi was threatening the possibility of his own happiness with an unbending will, Ndiyzé concluded and decided that it were time the man be told the truth. What, for instance, if Nnkaa now decides to rip apart the hoe handle or demand to be given what belongs to them? Ndiyzé knew that Awa-nkaa was under a lot of pressure from his people and given his age, there was little he could do against popular cries, at least not for long any more. Already there were whispers about their Kwi'for coming out with a pronouncement that will greatly shaken Asobo-Ntsi's confidence. That could be the very beginnings of disaster, especially as the Fon will not want to be seen as weak.

Ndiyzé rounded the corner into his compound, only instinctively relating to the people he met. His greetings or responses to greetings sounded strange to him as his feet found their way around bumps and hedges. The grandchildren who rushed up to him from his compound fighting each other for greetings and reporting the wayward ones were disappointed at the concentrated look on the old man's face. They had been used to little bits of palace niceties shared out to them by Ndiyzé whenever he returned from a visit to Asobo-Ntsi. But today he just walked pass them with an almost sullen look in his eyes, affected by the confounding nature of his own judgements.

Ndimbah did not go directly to his compound. He was getting used to the shock of the latest intelligence from the palace, he could not do otherwise but accept it, he decided. Yet his anger remained and must be manifested against those who had teamed up to humiliate

him. He was known in all of Nyen as the dog that never went to another person's latrine and now his very name was to be the subject of children stories. How could Ndum take upon himself the prerogative of acting on behalf of the family when he should know better? He knew his brother and his unkempt temperance; nothing pleased him more than brew controversy and then watch confusion take over the arena. People will now laugh at him and his name would be in every mouth at every gathering as the man who could not control his house. They would conclude that Ndum had to come in with a desperate tactic to save the family name. But save it from what, Ndimbah pondered.

He planted himself in front of his brother's door with the unuttered question on his lips like the central house pole. Silence fell on the room when they recognised who was there. Someone by the door offered Ndimbah a seat, but he ignored it, miserable with rage.

'What madness is this you have caused in Nyen?' His voice vibrated from his chest like an approaching thunderstorm, but it was also broken by the weariness of his present nightmare.

'Madness?' Ndum echoed, laughing. He had been drinking ever since he got up, to steel his will against the expected challenges of the day. 'I give my son the most beautiful woman in Nyen and the man says I am mad? What does he want of me, Nyen-Mechop?'

There were subdued titters in the room as Ndum swayed from side to side, pleased with himself. He was slightly tipsy, but so too was everybody in the room.

'Now Asobo-Ntsi is mad,' Ndimbah said, 'and no one can say the herb that will cure him.'

'He has always been mad, anyway.' It was the voice of Khan-Minie, piping out in the corner, stiffened too by drink. But Ndimbah again ignored it. Standing there and blocking the doorway with only his words filling the room, he sounded like a messenger with a message he must deliver before taking a rest if it were necessary. He had advanced into the house and could make out everybody in the room; they were the usual louts that would encourage a mad man to set fire to his own house and then turn and laugh behind his back.

'And know too that Awa-nkaa and his people will not sit and watch you take away their wife.'

'Who is afraid of Awa-nkaa and his people,' Ndum boasted, turning to the assembly; 'what can they do to a man with something

between his legs?’ And he pounded his chest with his clenched fist as if to prove himself, and staggered from the force of his own fist. He was laughing like a mask, deep and hollow.

Ngwikwih came in with pounded cocoyam mixed with black beans and behaved as if she did not notice Ndimbah. She merely glanced at him and skirted her way round the room, serving the hungry men. They helped themselves to generous lumps. When she reached her husband Ngwikwih looked up with indifference.

‘Will you not sit down?’ she said; but there was laughter in her voice also.

‘I did not come here to eat,’ Ndimbah said.

‘Who invited you to eat?’

‘He is sulking over Piembah’s bride,’ Ndum said, smacking his lips thoughtfully.

Ngwikwih paused at the door and looked back.

‘May be he was waiting to see his son grow white hair first.’ Her remark provoked drunken laughter in which Ngwikwih ran back to the women’s house.

‘What do you have to say now, Ndimbah?’ Tella said, wiping his eyes. ‘If we did not act the women would have done it for us. Did you know that aghaa was already mobilising? They were scared of Piembah whom they met everyday in the bushes on the way to their farms, and had to come up with a plan to appease the man one way or another, sooner or later.’

‘Besides, it would have been an insult for us to feed the chick and watch another take it away to roost,’ Khan-Minie added already becoming bolder. He was already thinking of a similar feat, if only to remain faithful to the heroism of his friend.

‘After all, we can always pay back Nkiuati’s gifts,’ Ndum said in his nonchalant way; ‘if a woman has no land, it is also true that she has no fixed home ...’

But Ndimbah had heard enough of the ranting. He would not stand there and listen to drunkards pour rot into his ears.

‘I stopped here,’ he said, ‘to inform you that Asobo-Ntsi’s messengers would soon be here with a royal gift for you.’ He was talking to Ndum in a way that cleared him of any involvement in the affair. ‘I hope you and your people will enjoy it and send your gratitude to Asobo-Ntsi. Nobody should think of me when the feast begins; I have already had my share of it and may now retire home. I

hope your hands are strong enough to help the messengers put down their load when they arrive. Anybody who knocks on my door for assistance shall leave with only one heel.'

He turned and walked out, drenched in his own humiliation. But he was also relieved, the usual spring almost returning into his step. He was relieved in a way, his mind was at peace, whatever people thought and said now. He knew his responsibilities like a father and had been working his way through every hurdle with the patience of a man who knew how to do his things, but rascals have shattered everything and now they would say he did not act like a father. The drunken howl from his brother's house followed him mixed with the women's shrill voices, as he acknowledged his own thoughts in retreat.

Mokwang had assembled his family members into his house, when news of his daughter's snatching reached him. He knew that no man who was a man and mattered in decision-making in the family would sit and accept the insult, not to talk of when that girl was Wonyen. They had talked right into the night and only arrived a compromise when the first cocks of dawn started crowing. They were yawning and stretching, their eyes were heavy, but their minds, hurting from the insult on the family, washed out the sleep from their eyes. As they chewed kolanut and talked, emptying and re-filling their horns with warm, relaxing wine, they felt the heavy village night dragging out on their resolve, sympathetic.

'That owl is hooting again,' Mokwang said, cocking his head to one side; 'I fear for what will follow.' For, he was a man with a keen ear for the unheard message of his ancestors, and claimed to interpret them without any professional credentials.

'Nothing will follow which we do not start,' Meuh-Nah said. She was the only woman present at the meeting and felt a certain supremacy among the men and could challenge their cries for blood. So much depended on her resolve, for did she not have her leg in each camp? And why should she allow either house to burn while she could still put out the flames? 'A widow does not choose lovers,' she always reminded her detractors. As a child she had been betrothed to the brother of Awa-nkaa's mother, for whom she bore four children

although in the end she had only Titsikè to show for all her cries as she often said. When her husband was killed during the first war Nyen fought against Tipah, she waited for her in-laws to decide with who she could be in the family. But they instead fought over her, threatening each other with poison. When her remaining son died in a mysterious way without even crying out for help, Meuh-Nah accused her late husband's people and decided to return to her father's compound. She had been with her people for only a year when the father of Piembah's mother approached her father to ask her hand in marriage again. Although he was a titled old man with many grown up children, some as old as Meuh-Nah herself, it did not bother her; she needed a place other than her father's compound, one where she could escape from the shame of having only a stretch of red mounds to show as her life's effort, behind the hut. She had three children with her new husband before he died in his sleep one night after a long illness. He had called her besides his bed and said he must go and as a last request from her, asked Meuh-Nah not to leave his compound again. She had watched the compound collapse in ruin, the children had all grown up and went their separate ways as shepherds and traders, and she was again lonely with only memories to keep. And now, as if they did not know anything about her past, the men were clamouring for her consent, urging her to give in to their mad call and accept a deal that would cut through her life like a ritual knife. No, a woman never denies the spot where the umbilical cords of her children lie, even in bitter tears. She can never retrace her footsteps, she said, without passing through Awa-nkaa's compound, and now blood-thirsty men urge her to fold her arms and watch the homestead go up in flames. Through the fruits and frustrations of her womb, she was able to tell them, more than any person, that all of Nyen is one family with only diverse branches. Even Nkhefor's lineage could not dispute that without contradicting themselves.

She regarded her frail arms, and thought of the life they had pampered, and of the life she had watched slip into the world beyond. No, her heart was for the living, but it was also responsible to the dead in a way that the men did not dream about. Only the mother knows the heart beat of the world, she whispered in her failing voice, and the person calling for flame against Ndimbah's thatch has never heard a woman's strained cry in the middle of the

night when only the owl calls the hour of passage, caught between the pangs of life and death, and refusing to surrender. Life was a resolve at acceptance, whatever was offered, at least her own days have been a resolution never to deny life, and she clung to it with a final effort.

The men listened to her, almost exasperated with impatience as she talked of her accumulated woes, elaborated herself and proposed solutions. They regarded her with a mixture of emotion. No matter how angry they were, none of them could raise a finger against her; and none present could oppose Meuh-Nah and still look into her eyes without blinking, denying himself consequently. They were caught in the thick spell of her pipe, wondering.

‘What will Nkiuati think of us?’ Mokwang said in a last appeal for his position. He had taken so much from Nkiuati’s people to pretend any frivolous sentiments when his people have been insulted.

‘My emaciated nipple knows what he will think, do you hear?’ Meuh-Nah said squeezing the droopy pad exposed under the heavy beads of her necklaces. ‘You do not know what it feels like,’ she went on, ‘when the child’s gums mangle this nipple.’ It was a kinship as no mouth could describe, she asserted, and she would turn her back on anyone who carries fire against Ndimbah. It was a threat that the men felt deep in their bones, and knew what it meant, weary as they were, because they too were in a way, survivors on Meuh-Nah’s nipple. But they were angry still, for Meuh-Nah knew their weakness, even as men, against her. Was she not the one person whom life had tortured and laughed at, so that humiliation became a part of her household to which she now rallied the men for consensus? She had refused to give in, and instead laughed when people expected her to hide her head and weep.

‘Wonyen is not dead,’ she concluded, ‘and we should not carry death to her when she still has to live.’

The men were helpless against her resolve; she knew where life reached, where it failed, and also how to distinguish it from death. She was not yet ready for death, she was fed up with a dying effort to live, and wondered how the men could be so blind? Her breasts had fed both life and death, and she knew both and could look at them without turning away, and who wished to offer her a lie, she challenged turning to Mokwang, in place of life?

A hypnotic silence fell on the room. No one could think of

anything else to say beyond the affirmation for which Meuh-Nah stood tall in her stoopy gait, challenging. The men recoiled into themselves and sneaked out of the room, one after the other, in a silent file, when Meuh-Nah hobbled away on her staff with her affronting lips sealed in a snarling mockery of the men. They would wait then, for the day to show them what to do, if Ndimbah does not send someone to them.

'It was for the debtor to come for his debt,' Meuh-Nah had said in departure and they were condemned to wait for Nkiuati. Their clubs, smeared with nstop and other portions slackened in their fists, all the by-ways of the envisaged attack were blocked, and the men were miserable again admitting the retreat.

With dawn they again gathered in Mokwang's house and talked and waited. In the end it was still Meuh-Nah who proposed that they send someone to Nkiuati to express their concern over the affair and find out from him what to do.

Chapter Nine

And Memory stood once more on threshold of dawn and cast a lone utterance into the gloom which he saw in distant clouds, for what shall come to pass, long recorded: 'The past has many voices,' the voice of Memory said, trembling, 'and those who remember draw lines that are shadows of heroic ways; those who try to remember also try to sing their own songs with voices that are broken by the guilt of my transgression'.

And in the new day, exhausted by feasting and prophecy, weak limbs scampered over their hopes and fears, and fought to erase the soiled phase of their history that was still to come...

And Tella'a listened and thought to himself: what if tomorrow I fail members of my Committee charged with evaluating pupils for the scholarship programme? Shall they believe me if I said there was knowledge beyond knowledge, to which we were blind?

By midday the following day, every child in Nyen knew that Piembah had insulted Nkiuati by rubbing shit on his head. He had done what had never been done, they cried, echoing Asobo-Ntsi's own cry, by depriving another prince of his bride. Then they tried to estimate the nature of the cleansing, exaggerated by their selfish desires to magnify the crime and prolong the thrill from it. For in one blundering act of madness, Ndum and his brother's son had animated the village beyond words.

And Piembah went about like a shadow, not sure of where he was going or what he was doing. He just acted, blind and instinctive, and felt things were the way they should be. He had not seen Wonyen ever since the women sneaked her out of Ndum's ntang. And he was beginning to wonder at the bald challenges and expectations of matrimony, not sure almost, if it were worth the trouble, and if it were only this, the estranged feeling of being a hero without nothing to show in fact. He wanted his wife, to be where every visitor will see her and understand what Piembah had dared. Wonyen was still wailing and refused to taste anything.

'When she gets tired,' Ndum said with his glittering eyes

peering out of the dark corner, 'she will search for food herself; if no one offers her a morsel, she will steal it. Then she will belong to us. Now she is only confused.'

But Piembah felt differently. It was now clear that he was an outcast. He was already thinking of how to go away with his wife, if only she were to submit to him. He was confident that Nwuoupang will take him into his service and he could wait for time to mend the rift, if necessary.

Yet nothing was working the way Ndum had promised. Piembah had never heard his father sound so tearful and forlorn, against him. And he was informed too that his mother had vowed not to see him again until he returned Nkiuati's wife. She could not bear the shame of walking through Nyen with a covered head because of a stupid son.

Still, Piembah sipped his wine and wondered about his life, what was remaining of it. It seemed he had stepped into one of his own traps and the cord was tightening around his ankle while his hands were restrained. He was wriggling in silent pain, afraid to cry out so people should not think he was a woman. Wonyen's people were noted for their madness and even now that they had been prevented from any stupid action by Asobo-Ntsi's royal order, they could still defy even the Fon and surprise Ndum at night.

It was another ordinary day in Nnkaa, deceitful in its calm. Word had gone out to the elders, following the return of the delegation from the palace that the men were to subdue any sentiments in their families over the snatching.

'It is an elbow-fight,' they said smiling and drinking from their horns, and talking about other things; 'sometimes brothers must say and do things differently,' they continued. Then they discussed the hunt of the previous day and boasted how it was the biggest in recent memory, and expected their share from the palace by nightfall. The drinking spots were lively, they made it so from their talk, sharing kolanut, tobacco and snuff at intervals. There was no mention of Wonyen as they gulped and sneezed. And when a hot-tempered young man challenged the elders over their silence, the reply was always the same.

‘You young men will want to bring down the house central pole with just one blow of your head,’ they said smiling behind the smoke rising from their pipes. ‘But we know what to do. We cannot use clubs when we see two brothers using their elbows against each other, over a piece of bearded meat.’

And they had laughed drank and smoked.

At the same time, though, Awa-nkaa sent word to his elders to meet that night. It was a decisive meeting and nobody out of the group was to know about it, not even Ndoh.

So after his evening meal Nkiuati slipped out of his compound unnoticed, and arrived Awa-nkaa’s house early enough to meet him licking the last black smear from his achu’ leaf. He was the first to come in, but as if the others had been waiting for him to open the door, they started arriving. Tita came in with a calabash of raffia, which he immediately poured into the earthen pot on the fire.

When the customary greetings were over, Awa-nkaa surveyed the group from behind his hooding lashes. It was an impressive gathering, the very heart of Nnkaa that was responsible for the fate of the people.

‘Before we talk about what has brought us here,’ Awa-nkaa began with a new vibrancy in his voice, feeling the air suddenly heavy and oppressive, ‘I want to show you our parcel from Asobo-Ntsi.’ Then he smiled; ‘It seems no family in Nyen will need meat until next season.’

But Tita looked up in opposition.

‘If I understand Awa-nkaa,’ he said, ‘Asobo-Ntsi has sent our share of the hunt. That is fine; it is his duty to let us have our due. But I think that before we thank him as it is also our duty, we should first look into the problem of our wife’s snatching, then we can share our gift from Asobo-Ntsi.’

‘I think Tita is right,’ Nkiuati said, unable to suppress his feelings any more. ‘The mouth that is full does not know how to say no.’

Awa-nkaa looked around at the solemn faces for any opposing view, and seeing none, bowed his head briefly, like a nod, giving in. That was his way of acknowledging the wishes of his people, when words were not adequate enough.

‘Who is Awa-nkaa to say no when Nnkaa says yes?’ he said almost laughing, ‘that is the way we have lived, and that is the way we

must always live.' He turned to the messengers and without even uttering a word the two knew the assembly was waiting to hear what they had brought back from Asobo-Ntsi, obvious as it already was.

The room was solemn with silent emotion as Ndofohuh related the events in the palace that morning. There were momentary looks of surprise, others nodded in ironic confirmation of a fact, with short hollow laughs from time to time.

'What did you expect?' Ntahpong burst out to no one in particular when Ndofohuh's inciting voice was silent. 'We have behaved in this land like women who wish to be treated as men!' Then he subsided into a moody state, gulping his wine in vindictive calmness. It was all a man could do, drink and listen to the silence engulfing him in humiliation because he was no longer manly enough to defend his manhood.

Nnkaa had heard the story, consciously arousing as it was, from the mouth of a man whose lips were swollen with the blood of revenge. For Ndofohuh did not attempt to hide his feeling; only appropriate action from his people could pacify their anger and justify their words of courage to their own children.

When he was through he swallowed his drink in quick gulps and stared around the room with a disturbing blankness. Awa-nkaa knew what that meant from a man who could dare a python with his bare hands. He had to step in with the softer words of a man who still knew his own strength even when he appeared to concede to his opponent.

'It is true what Ndofohuh has said,' he began. 'We knew what to expect even before sending him and Tita to Asobo-Ntsi. But it was also our duty to send you since, otherwise we would have been behaving like the man who sees a bundle and swears that he knows what is inside.'

'Now that we know that it is weeviled kolanuts that we have been courting for so many seasons in the bundle, what then do we do?' It was Tita who, observing that Awa-nkaa had paused to catch his breath had uttered the first thing that came to his mind. He felt personally insulted as one of those who had to bear the bias of Asobo-Ntsi on behalf of Nnkaa.

But his intervention was enough to sway the group from Awa-nkaa's moderate tone. The others looked up in unworded acknowledgement of Tita's stand, and braced themselves for what it

implied. Awa-nkaa also felt their solidarity not against him but against what they considered the common enemy of Nnkaa. It was not an individual, they all knew, that blocked Nnkaa's path but all of Nyen, so how were they to move ahead against such an enemy? That was what he wanted to know. Awa-nkaa felt himself being pushed aside, gently, simply because they would love to do it with brute force and immediacy if he resisted. So he was giving way, watching the flame leaping out of their eyes with anger that could no longer be suppressed.

'Yes, Awa-nkaa,' Awafong said, feeling the frustration which Ndofoh and Tita must have suffered that morning in the palace, 'that is what we have to decide now, like men and not like women.'

'You should have seen the way in which Asobo-Ntsi twinkled his eyes in sly tell-tales of assurances to Ndimbah!' Tita said, his thick lips firmed with resolution, and looked around imposingly to stress his point. 'Awa-nkaa asked what we have to do now; what I say is that we have to let Asobo-Ntsi know that Nnkaa men should no longer be treated as women!' The men nodded aggressively, some tapping their feet on the ground to emphasize the fact.

Nkiuati's blood was beating in a similar rhythm, he would have loved to talk, but he knew that this was not his moment, but that of Nnkaa, to talk and act; he only had to listen and follow.

Ama'a cleared his throat and greeted the group. He had not talked all evening, but had identified every emotion behind every word and smelled blood in the spaces between the words. And he understood that too.

'Nnkaa is weeping again,' he said at last, 'that is what the snatching of Wonyen has done to us. Our heads are once more exposed to the sun and to ridicule. But I hear two voices here calling for action. One cautions that we wait till dawn, to see our way clearly and be justified in our actions; no one should ever accuse us of sneaking behind shadows to redress a wrong. But the other voice says that we cannot wait for tomorrow which may never come; that we have waited for too long already and that tomorrow is forever. Impatience makes that voice to be erect with purpose. They too are right for do we not say that when waiting for a companion on a journey you should be moving ahead? If dawn should meet us on the fringes of our errand, then that will be good.'

He was choosing his words with care; his detractors always

associate him with Asobo-Ntsi's recalcitrance and now that he was citing with Awa-nkaa's moderation he had to be careful not to provoke the anger of the camp led by Tita and Ntahpong.

'We have all been abused in this,' he went on, 'and Ama'a will be the last person to say that Nnkaa should fold its arms and instead thank Asobo-Ntsi for sending our own share of the hunt-meat.' He paused and looked around; the heavy silence that hailed him was threatening and he almost faltered as he continued.

'Awa-nkaa spoke for all of Nnkaa, so too did Tita and Ntahpong. But we cannot do two things at once. That will prove to all of Nyen that we are divided and cannot even agree amongst us. We are here in the presence of two men through whom Nnkaa has been abused repeatedly and made miserable. Was Awa-nkaa meant to be a mere receiver of gifts from Asobo-Ntsi? But it is wisdom that has made him to be patient and wait for dawn to come. We are angry with him at times, but in the end we have to admit that we admire his patience the more for always reminding us that the rash man chases his debtor away from a distance.'

Ama'a was happy with his approach. Without any conscious effort he was breaking the stubborn will threatening him. He saw it linger against him and his words for a while, imposing, but then it was in retreat already, acknowledging him, or so he thought, listening to his own words.

'Take a look at Nkiuati,' he said. 'Which Nnkaa man would have believed that Nkiuati will take such insult on his red feather with such humility as he has shown? I must confess that I do not know him any more. But it is also good knowledge and I think his troubles have also made him wise enough to know that the man of anger may break his neck in trying to pin down a stupid ruffian.'

He has spoken, the bridge way for conflicting hearts, the camwood-coated word for bruising tongues. Even Tita's head was bowed while Ntahpong's eyes dropped, coerced by the voice of Ama'a. Gradually, one after the other, they stirred out of their cramped corners and uttered themselves in concession with some anger, though, at those whose caution has transformed them into slaves of humiliation. Awa-nkaa smiled weakly, listening to them, and wondered what would happen in his eventual absence. Their reckless spirit was what troubled him now, as his weak eyes tried to single them out although he did not really need to see them to know who

was talking. They were almost happy again in the end, having subdued their rising spleen. After all dawn was not far away, as the cocks were already crowing the first calls and more wine had been successively poured into the pot. If Asobo-Ntsi fails to take any concrete action against Ndimbah's son so that Nnkaa can have their wife back, then it will be clear to everybody that he has taken sides and again deprived Nnkaa of what is vital to her pride amongst all Nyen families. That was the understanding that restrained the rising tempers for the moment as the men settled on their wine and casual talk. There was no need to hurry home since wine, kola and the tense talk had wiped out sleep from their eyes.

Then suddenly, from the distance, the night was pierced by shouts. At first they sounded like excited voices at the annual Fon's wrestling contest, but gradually it became clear that they were voices of panic, rising and falling in frantic waves. The group of Nnkaa elders listened.

'Someone is dead,' Ndofouh said.

They listened, the direction of the voices now becoming distinct, from around the Mouloup valley, rising toward Nnkaa on the still air of pre-dawn.

'Asobo-Ntsi's thugs may be in action,' Tita said in spite of himself.

'No,' Awa-nkaa said, 'it is not death, and Asobo-Ntsi's youa never operate after midnight. It is something else and I fear the consequence.'

He looked up at the same time that the others got his meaning and looked up with a mixture of alarm and vindication. But even the most volatile amongst them knew that things may go out of hand if not sanctioned by the inner core of Nnkaa elders now surrounding Awa-nkaa. They were silent for some time contemplating the vapour rising from their horns and wondering.

'Where was Ndoh when you left home?' It was Ama'a addressing Nkiuati who looked up confused. He had not seen the boy the whole day and assumed that he was in his house or with his friends trying to nurse their plight and wait for the elders to decide. But now he began to see differently. What if the boys had actually taken matters into their hands? He shook his head without uttering a word and silence was again heavy in the room. It was decided that Tita should go and discreetly find out.

Ntahpong opted to accompany him. In ordinary times many would have opposed the pair together on any mission. But given the uncertain state of things, they were ready to risk caution for the unknown.

The two felt their way through the dark like fugitives in a foreign land. Once they were beyond the boundaries of Nnkaa they took to back tracks and cut across coffee farms to avoid the barking dogs. They were soon descending toward the palace and could see the fire glowing from the hearth of the guards. They paused to decide on which road to take; they had to avoid the vigilance of Asobo-Ntsi's dogs. They were not long in deciding, and concluded that it would be safer to pass through old Ndizuh's compound than dare the palace confines. They preferred to be challenged by the old man and his children, if they had to, than face the guards at that time of the night. After all, Ndizuh was Tita's distant in-law even if Menyam had abandoned his home. Asobo-Ntsi's guards prowled the village at night as if they owned it and will certainly detain them in the palace till morning and then submit them to the scrutiny of Asobo-Ntsi's elders.

They were soon beyond the palace and climbing toward Ndimbah's compound. It was now clear that that was the source of the wailings. The bushes were thick and crackled noisily under their feet although they were moving like cats. Suddenly Tita stopped and pulled Ntahpong at the same time to the ground. They were nearly entering the main path, and a short distance away they could hear voices coming toward them.

'The fools,' one was saying, 'if they think this will force Asobo-Ntsi to rush to Ndum to get back Wonyen for them then they do not know the lion.' He blew out his nose noisily. They were walking by and Tita could have touched their legs as they passed.

'Cowards too,' the second voice put in, their voices already fading away. 'How can they carry fire to a man already distressed by Asobo-Ntsi's curse, and expect the Fon to thank them? No one clears Asobo-Ntsi's bushes for him!'

And they laughed haughtily down the path, and their voices died out beyond the two Nnkaa men still cramped in their squatting positions, anticipating more of Asobo-Ntsi's thugs as it was their custom never to walk in a single contingent.

'That was Tatipong,' Ntahpong whispered, stretching his

neck over Tita's shoulders to get a view of the dark path.

'Yes,' Tita said shortly. Ntahpong knew what was already going on in the other's mind. The arena was getting ready for the dance Tita loved best and his mind could only wander in anticipation of the moment when Nnkaa will assert their manhood and do things the way they are supposed to be done. Ntahpong could feel it in his companion's rare meditative silence, the way in which he now got up and nodded a snappy command for them to move on, stepping out of the crackling undergrowth.

But Ntahpong was disappointed to note that they were still moving in the direction of Ndimbah's compound. Were they not supposed to return now and inform the elders of Nnkaa of what has happened?

'We were sent to go and find out and you do not want to take what two drunks said to Nnkaa?' Tita said increasing his pace.

'I do not know,' Ntahpong said in the resigned tone of a man who was past caring. Stubbornly courageous as he was, Ntahpong was never sure of Asobo-Ntsi's guards and was always unsure in their vicinity.

They walked on without talking and made the summit of the hill and could now look down, to their left at Ndimbah's compound. It was clear that the man's house was no longer there, only a huge pile of smouldering logs and bamboos now heaped in the semi-darkness. Little tongues of fire leapt up here and there, lighting the strained faces of those gathered there their confused voices calling and denouncing, screaming and weeping around the scattered remains like participants at a night ritual enacting a blood-letting scene. Tita had crept right down to just a short distance away from the house of Ndimbah's first wife, and Ntahpong, his heart beating violently, laboured after him. They could clearly pick out and identify the various voices that were lamenting and cursing in their bewilderment. Nnkaa had to pay, they vowed, even if Asobo-Ntsi says no! Who has ever heard it said that a father is punished for the careless acts of a stubborn child? Asobo-Ntsi must make them pay else the whole of Nyen may go up in flames, when retaliation will spill over on family relations. They were almost happy in their solemn invocation of chaos, their sharp voices gaining the courage of desperation tickled by a desire not to be seen as women. It did not matter in the least that all of Nyen could be victimised a feud among

brothers as long as it concerned power and who controls it. Was Piembah not right after all, and a man too, if their opponents can only manifest their emotions under the guise of night? No man owns a woman, a bride for that matter, they argued in mad fury, and who says Wonyen could not as well belong to their son? Their sympathy was shifting in the matter and anger emboldened them; blood was being rallied to rescue kinship from insidious threats for no father will openly reprimand a wayward child for daring to manifest his courage amongst his peers.

Tita had heard enough and feared that he will be forced to retort from his hiding place if they did not return immediately. He turned without uttering a word and Ntahpong followed like a shadow in the dark, immersed in fear of what would happen to them if Ndimbah's people were to spot their departing shadows.

Chapter Ten

It was already clear that dark clouds were hanging over Nyen. Everyone felt it except Asobo-Ntsi whose head spun with plans. The owl was hooting doom and the people pretended not to hear. Why should they when they had no ready answers against the Fon's arrogance? He was deaf too to suggestions that the Gods be consulted. For, the banks of Qwang were heavy with premonition and Tisagli threatened a drought, but Asobo-Ntsi, man of violent justice, only laughed as if on the verge of his own madness.

Asobo-Ntsi turned around, against himself, baffled by the turn of events. It was as if he were being flogged by uncontrollable winds, whipping his stature into submission and forcing him to say yes when he wanted to scream no. His 'smokers' had been abroad to gather information for him immediately he learned of the fire incident in Ndimbah's compound. Not being a man to talk softly to an enemy, Asobo-Ntsi felt his heart beat in reluctant sympathy with Ndimbah. But events were intervening with his schedule, and pushing him beyond himself and he did not like that.

'Did my lord sleep well?'

It was the voice of Mafor, coaxing in feigned ignorance. It was the second time she was asking the same question but Asobo-Ntsi was still deaf to her, meditative, and pulling at his pipe in vigorous puffs.

'What is happening to my lion today?' Mafor said, now squatting besides the Fon.

Asobo-Ntsi waved Cho-Muluh away and looked at Mafor with glazed eyes, almost smiling through snarled lips.

'I asked if Tsa-apifor slept well?' Mafor repeated in her usual patient voice.

'How can I, mother?' Asobo-Ntsi said. He looked up and Mafor saw the burden of the night in his sparkling eyes. 'How can I when Ndimbah's son wants to bring woe onto my head?' His voice was a tired whisper, trembling with emotion, which Mafor could not recognise.

'Is that all, my lord?' Mafor said trying to hide her embarrassment; 'the lion has overcome more serious problems and a child's play should not deprive you of sleep.'

'There can be no sleep when the mind is troubled.' He was talking abstractly, as if reciting something to himself.

'Then you should not abandon your sleeping chambers; that will only increase the troubles.' Mafor had tried to be diplomatic in her mission, disguised as part of her morning routine in the Fon's chambers, but found out that she had to be blunt if she must open Asobo-Ntsi's mouth. 'You know better how to solve these problems,' she said.

'When they come from outside,' Asobo-Ntsi admitted, 'but not when a prince decides to soil the royal bed to which all of us owe our dignity. The problem of woman is greatest, mother, and I cannot sleep while Awa-nkaa's people are not happy.'

Mafor looked away as if in thought, but every word to be uttered had been on her lips even before she entered Asobo-Ntsi's private chambers, and Asobo-Ntsi knew it. At another time it would be a welcome diversion for the two to pull at each other's thoughts, dragging them out in rascally strands. It was a game they both understood and loved, in the delicate administration of a straying people but inseparable, in which case they had to weigh their thoughts and balance them against the general interest.

'But that is not the reason why Asobo-Ntsi should abandon his sleeping chambers?' she said, again coaxing. 'The women are already complaining, Tsa-apifor, and you know Sirri is still a child; she needs to become a woman, my lord.'

'Not at a time when a child shows my people that Asobo-Ntsi is not a man.' His forehead was furrowed and he was reclined in his ostrich-tail back chair, his eyes closed. Mafor was aware of the peaceful look returning to his face, even if it was not completely relaxed. He was like a child muttering in its sleep. 'A child conceived of at a moment of vengeance is doomed. But let them wait,' he said, 'I will not run away. Talk to them and give them all they want.'

'But you know I cannot give them everything, my lord,' Mafor protested.

'What can I do now, mother?' His eyes were opened again and once more the pervasive look of manhood came into his face, giving him the snarl of an animal, Mafor thought, recoiling

instinctively. 'I am also the leader of my people, not just the owner of my sleeping chambers! They must wait, you tell them that. Make sure you supervise the hunt-meat as it goes out, especially the parcels that shall be sent to my brothers in Ala'papah and Ala'mewyiu. Waah will still come in tomorrow to see to it that the meat is properly salted and baked. We shall share it in due time but already, let the women have what they want together with this moon's ration of oil.' He paused as he heard footsteps outside and then continued as a gentle knock came on the door; 'For now I need time to be alone and to think. When I return from Atisong I shall own my sleeping chambers again, but not before!' That was the dismissive phrase, the likes of which Mafor was already used to, and often used her discretion to ignore.

The knock was repeated.

'Who is there?' Mafor's voice was shrill with sudden impatience. She could not understand why people who should know still intrude into her private consultations with Asobo-Ntsi.

'It is me, Mafor,' a voice piped out.

'What now, Medakih?' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'come in.'

'The messenger from Shih is here to see Tsa-apifor,' Medakih said as soon as he was in and stooped. It was evident that he was uncomfortable in the presence of Mafor, and avoided her stern look that searched for some reason from his wrinkling face.

'What does he want with Asobo-Ntsi?' she said aggressively.

'I do not know, mother; he only wished to see Tsa-apifor.'

'Then tell him Tsa-apifor is still in bed. Could you not tell him it was too early for the lion to be abroad? Must you be told everything? Go and ask him to wait!' She was barking in low tones, but it was enough to make Medakih shift uncomfortably. It amused Asobo-Ntsi, often, to see how influential she was over the palace servants, and knew that while they respected him out of traditional deference, they did so to Mafor because of her own very stern personality, subjugating them all.

Medakih turned in hesitant confusion toward the door.

'Wait Meda,' Asobo-Ntsi called out, 'let the man in;' and then in explanation to Mafor, 'Am I not responsible to the people at any time, mother?'

Mafor saw the swing of the cord toward her to hemper her in; it was what she herself often told him in his moments of depression, when

like a child he cursed the day he was reigned in by the king-makers and paraded in front of the people for their tiny, spittle-smeared pebbles; he could not do otherwise, she will encourage him, but listen to the people and try to make them happy even in pretence. After all he was their burden-bearer, which task also shielded him from common, personal attacks. Now he was applying the same tactic against her resistance but she did not want to be tethered to her own words as if a slave to them. To wriggle out of his swing she pretended to be alarmed, her old face hooded in concern.

‘Here my lord?’ she cried, ‘you cannot receive a messenger in your private ...’

‘Yes mother, even the messenger can enjoy the privilege of royalty once in a while. His mission may just provide the cure which Nyen needs now.’ Then he turned again to Medakih who had been hanging by the door waiting for deliverance, ‘Let him in, Meda.’

‘Then I must leave,’ Mafor said, tight-lipped. ‘Nobody will respect you any more if you treat everybody like equals.’ Asobo-Ntsi knew that she was no longer feigning and she nearly bumped her majestic self into Medakih who had to stand aside to let her pass, casting a stabbing look at the messenger and rushed off without responding to his humble greetings mumbled in awe.

Asobo-Ntsi had thrown a feathered skullcap on his head before Medakih ushered in the messenger and had already assumed a regal pose, intimidating the messenger who was evidently miserable in the confines of such solemnity. It was an embarrassment very few ordinary citizens had been fortunate to experience and while he nearly trembled in front of Asobo-Ntsi his heart also fluttered; he could not wait to reach home to describe how Asobo-Ntsi welcomed him into the inner chambers of the palace where they shared wine and kola!

‘You are welcome, son of Shih!’ Asobo-Ntsi greeted, after the other nearly collapsed in front of him in stooped humility. ‘What urgent news drags your legs to the palace so early? Do not tell me your people want to take back their pledge!’ And he laughed, pleased with himself and also to make the other relax.

‘No, ‘Tsa-apifor,’ the messenger said, his embarrassment increasing with the Fon’s casual attitude, ‘but the people of Meshih send you greetings and wish to know if the night was peaceful? And humbly request your highness to give them one more Ngheyu to pay

their taxes. They plead with Tsa-apifor for this only.'

'Thank you worthy son, and thank Shih for me. It is a foolish child who does not seek to know why his father snores at night.' Asobo-Ntsi paused and looked at the messenger directly. 'But tell the people of Meshih that our plans must always go forward or else we fail. Asobo-Ntsi cannot change his plans everyday and for everybody and not have headaches and then snore at night like a castrated bull.' Without looking at him, Asobo-Ntsi knew that Medakih was wearing a painful expression on his face then, at the reflective reference to his own masculine inability, doomed by a commitment to royal service. But Asobo-Ntsi no longer cared about his or any of his guards' feelings toward the inevitable challenge to their loyalty, thankful, though, that he was never the one to perform their task. 'My strength lies in maintaining our plans,' he was saying fixing Mecham's messenger in an unsympathetic gaze. 'Tongari will visit them in three days and burn down the houses of those who wish to know whether or not Asobo-Ntsi is still the lion of the land.'

'Shih begs the lion for just one more Ngheyu, O, Tsa-apifor!'

But it was in vain to implore Asobo-Ntsi, and the messenger should have known so. Asobo-Ntsi smiled in his pensive way when he no longer considered the topic under discussion worthy of more debate. Mecham was a worthy man of respect especially after seasons of living with Ndiyzé had rubbed a bit of the more elderly man's humility on his own heart. Yet, he was housing ruffians and Asobo-Ntsi was not to have that.

'I never say "No" twice, and Mecham knew that even while he sent you here,' he said in a calm voice cocking his head so that his wrinkled forehead caught the rays of the sun cutting into the room through the raffia fronds of the lintel over the window. It was a modern structure, the plan of which had been given to him by Nwuoupang as compensation for Asobo-Ntsi's loyalty to the Administration at Atisong. Nwuoupang had supplied the rare material and technical expertise for the building and had spent two nights in one of the two spare rooms when he was touring the village. 'Beware, son of Shih! You are only the hunting dog; do not let the spear meant for the animal hit you! Your father used to listen with one ear. Tongari is in Nnkaa today; tomorrow they will be in Achiy, and then Ntiyn before Shih. Leave now and let Shih know my wish!' Then as the two went out he added in a softer tone, to Medakih, 'Do

not forget to take him to Mafor for his bundle.'

His mind was again in conflict with itself. He could not relent his position without appearing vulnerable. At the same time he must listen to the people weeping. He was almost drifting into a reverie with his thoughts and fears clung to one another in the enactment of a riddle whose solution could only be the affirmation of royal perfection. He was right, he was convinced of the fact, and knew that his people will soon realise the truth. But what if he were wrong? He banished further reflection on that possibility.

Then he heard knockings from a distance, the sound of which dragged him out of slumber, reluctant to be aware. The early morning smoke always knocked him off and from the sounds of birds outside he knew the sun was almost overhead. He felt stronger, yawning, as the knock was repeated at his chamber door, and presently the huge head of Medakih popped in again, alarm in his eyes.

'My lord,' he said without waiting for permission, 'there is a crowd of Nnkaa women, crying and rushing toward the palace!'

'What is their complaint?'

'Their houses, 'Tsa-apifor! Tongari burned down four when the women started shouting insults at 'Tsa-apifor saying 'Tsa-apifor was not ... even ... even a man!'

'Tell them, Medakih, that a horde of flies can do nothing to the lion, go! My wish must not be altered.'

But Medakih hesitated, lingering with uncertainty.

'What is the matter with you now?' Asobo-Ntsi barked.

'The women my lord ... they are not here. It was 'Tadtipong who brought the news.'

'Then tell 'Tad-tipong that the women must not reach the palace grounds!'

Medakih was relieved as he carried his bulk away. He always dreaded being the one to do all the dirty work for Asobo-Ntsi, and the last time that he had confronted the women, they had threatened him with the curse of aghaa.

Asobo-Ntsi's mind began to wander again, away from himself. Was he not Asobo-Ntsi and the lion of the land? And will he no longer lead and take decisions like a leader because the people of

Nyen have become too headstrong and their women are crying and rushing toward the palace?

But what if all the women were to turn against him following the Nnkaa example? That was something that has never happened and Asobo-Ntsi knew that he could not provide an immediate answer for that. Something like fear gripped him momentarily. May be it were time he revised his tactics. But will they not take him for granted if he were even to flatter them? Will the child not suddenly invite him to go and fetch water from the stream simply because he decides to be friendly? But he could still flatter them, that is what they loved most, to be flattered as the real queens of the land, his true wives without whom he would be powerless; those who tell him what to do and what not to do; what would Nyen become without them, the real pillars of the land? That should be the approach, Asobo-Ntsi told himself, to check this surge of emotions against him before it exploded.

Then he heard the voice of the first queen, calling from outside.

‘Is my lord alone?’

‘What is the problem now, Wopong?’ he said with the familiar ring of intimacy returning to his vice.

The woman came in and briefly looked around the draped room before addressing him. Next to Mafor she was the only female in the palace for whom Asobo-Ntsi reserved something like formal respect and she could talk to him without regard for ceremony.

‘I hear you are worried?’

Asobo-Ntsi tried to laugh, but it only came out in fragments of his emotions.

‘Why should Mafor go about raising alarm when there is no fire to put out yet? Of course I have problems, Wopong, but is that not why I am Asobo-Ntsi!’ He was sounding familiar already but the queen’s looks were still stunted, against him.

‘But you seem to be too hard, my lord. Nnkaa is already angry over their wife. They have been holding secret meetings and I fear the outcome.’

‘I know,’ he said; ‘I have been informed. But it is only a woman’s fear, Wopong,’ he continued, trying to sound convincing even to himself. ‘There is nothing to worry about. I was even thinking ...’

He was interrupted by Cho-Muluh who rushed in, breathless and burst out even before Asobo-Ntsi could recognise him.

‘Nnkaa, my lord ... the Nnkaa women!’

‘Are my ears going to be blocked today by Nnkaa and their women?’ Asobo-Ntsi had lost his patience just when Wopong thought she was gaining control over him. ‘Then what will happen when I visit the other families? But what is the problem now?’

‘They are crying, my lord ...’

‘Get out, you rat! Is it because they are crying that I must not rest?’

‘No, my lord. But their babies too have been burned so they have come to urge Tsa-apifor to stop Tongari before much catastrophe occurs.’

Cho-Muluh was no longer aware of Asobo-Ntsi; the heavy nature of the message he bore hardened him even against the Fon. He was relieved to see the first queen clasp her head in acknowledgement of woe and muttered invocations to the Gods, when he mentioned the disaster.

‘No one dares to stop a charging mask until its mission is accomplished,’ Asobo-Ntsi said. ‘Let their husbands pay their taxes and Tongari shall never visit them. It is not for fear of dying that they should live and disobey me.’

‘You cannot say that, my lord,’ Wopong said in distress; ‘the land may break apart!’

‘And why should it not, if the people only stay together from fear of death?’ This was also what he loved in such tense moments, to wrap himself and his meaning in words and remain elusive; and loved to watch people go away in confusion, not understanding him.

‘But my lord ...’ Wopong began.

‘Woman, stay out of this!’ His voice was once more cold and threatening. ‘I do not want to lose my temper with you.’

The first queen slipped out of the room without another word and Asobo-Ntsi glared at Cho-Muluh briefly.

‘Is there someone out there?’ he said his breathing returning to normal.

‘Dampoulou is there, Tsa-apifor,’

‘Call for him.’

Cho-Muluh stepped out and whistled for Dampoulou who was more an errand boy than a guard although during important

ceremonies he performed the latter function.

‘What does he want me for?’ Dampoulou whispered, a bit anxious.

‘You can ask him when you get in,’ Cho-Muluh said, happy that he was one of the very few royal servants privileged to take liberties with Asobo-Ntsi even when the Fon was not in his humour.

Dampoulou scratched his head and trailed Cho-Muluh, his mind beginning to wander.

They found Asobo-Ntsi supporting his head in his left palm, the right hand feeling the huge beads of his necklace.

‘Tsa-apifor!’ Dampoulou greeted. Cho-Muluh had stood aside to let him in.

‘Go to Ama’a now,’ Asobo-Ntsi said after clearing his throat unnecessarily, ‘and tell him I want to see him immediately.’

Dampoulou went out after a stiff bow.

‘Now, Cho-Muluh, have you heard anything more?’ Asobo-Ntsi said.

‘No, Tsa-apifor, except that another meeting is planned for this evening. I can only hear something more after that. But this time they will be meeting in Ndofouh’s house. I will be there before them to visit the sister of my mother’s brother’s wife.’

He was pleased to confide so much in Asobo-Ntsi and even more pleased that the Fon had so much confidence in him. People mistook him for Asobo-Ntsi’s pipe-boy, a running nose pipe-carrier, not knowing that he was at the heart of the Fon’s plans. He knew of the Fon’s every action once it had been dissolved into his blood and rushed to his head like Awah-Mbang’s wine. Then Cho-Muluh became the Fon’s mekwiré, to relieve the man of the burden on his mind, monitoring the ways and by-ways, and giving assurance even when it was not possible. Asobo-Ntsi too was weak, and he knew it, and wished that those who mocked him could really understand the power he wielded over the lion! That was also why the Fon was never willing to let him spend a few nights in their compound. No sooner will he sneak into his mother’s hut than the guards would be heard from the threshold with a message to ‘return to the palace with that big headed son of Pie-Weghor!’

‘What of that accursed beast? Is he still hiding under Nduh’s roof?’ Asobo-Ntsi was saying.

‘Yes, Tsa-apifor,’ Cho-Muluh said abstractly, ‘but he will not

be there for long.' He was now sitting on a low wooden stool. Asobo-Ntsi looked up for explanation as if he was not about to do just that, Cho-Muluh thought. 'He and his friends were at Mitanyen today to buy wine and he was still beating his chest, Tsa-apifor, saying that even the lion cannot take away his wife! He was offering wine to everybody and telling them his story and how he has suffered to be where he is today. After the people drank they all agreed that he was right, that Asobo-Ntsi is a tyrant – that is what they said, Tsa-apifor – and that you must not always be obeyed.'

'Then they do not yet know me; when they do it will be too late.' Asobo-Ntsi was talking more to himself, his voice resounded in his throat and seemed to vibrate in his stomach, as he threw out his chest like a wrestler. 'But where did you say he will be leaving for?' He was very interested in particulars, and will follow every trail of a story to the end before he could be satisfied.

'He may move to his uncompleted house or go away to work for Nwuoupang.'

'May Awapie sweep away the bridge under his feet!' Asobo-Ntsi cried in a sudden outburst.

Then Ama'a came in like a man familiar with a sacred sanctuary where only the initiated could commune.

'I salute Asobo-Ntsi!' he greeted.

'Ama'a, you are welcome,' Asobo-Ntsi said. 'You know where to place your stool even in my private chambers.'

Ama'a had unhooked his stool from the antechamber as he came in, and now placed it adjacent to Asobo-Ntsi. Cho-Muluh withdrew in silence; he knew he was no longer needed for the Fon's intelligence diversion, not even the pipe will be necessary during this session.

'What is this I hear about secret meetings at night and about breaking away?' Asobo-Ntsi said without any preliminary softening of the grounds where they stood.

'Breaking away? Who is breaking away, Tsa-apifor?'

Ama'a was deliberately evasive, and will not look at Asobo-Ntsi straight in the face.

'Your people of course!' Asobo-Ntsi said. 'You thought I would never know!' Then he laughed his hollow laugh of derision. 'I know too that Awa-nkaa is not well, but that has not stopped your people from holding meetings for two nights now. What is the

problem?’

Although Ama’a had been taken by surprise, his equanimity remained. Asobo-Ntsi should have realised by now that Ama’a was a man of his own will and integrity, and loved nothing more than giving the false impression of weakness.

‘The only problem, Tsa-apifor,’ he said rather reluctantly, ‘is that Nnkaa is not happy with the way the matter of their wife has been handled and now their houses are being burned.’

‘Who suffers more, Ama’a? Tell me, who spends sleepless nights between your people and Asobo-Ntsi?’ He was placing his open palms on his thighs in a half-squat, slightly out of his stool, plaintiff. But he was not angry, only frank, and Ama’a knew it even if he too had his doubts now.

‘You see, Tsa-apifor, the other small problem is that this reminds them of old wounds and how ...’

‘Aha! I knew it will come down to this, and you call it a small problem? That is the real thing, not so? Yes, it is, do not say no!’ His spirits were gradually rising, but Ama’a looked on as composed as ever. ‘If Nnkaa did not pebble me, then I would understand the accusation that has refused to die with the seasons.’

‘Give Nnkaa her wife, Tsa-apifor, and the people will not think of the past. You can do it, take back their wife from that rascal and they will forget everything. You always show us the scar on your shin which you suffered as a rascally youth and then remind us that the past is like that mark, refusing to go away but not hurting, until some brutal act reminds you of that mishap; then you feel a pain that cannot be dismissed by mere words of consolation.’

Asobo-Ntsi was listening to his own words like a portion of ngvoure, and unwilling to accept the analogy.

‘Is that all?’ he said doggedly. ‘Have I not vowed never to see that beast again? Nnkaa cannot blame me for his crime! He is cursed and his children after him. If I took her back to Nnkaa, will your people still pay the ndeng-kohn, proudly arrogant as you are, and knowing that the beast has already crossed her? What do you want Asobo-Ntsi to do that will not affect your pride, especially when you also choose to see the scar that will always hurt you beyond words?’ He paused and relaxed into his stool. ‘As for the burning of houses, Ama’a, anybody in Nyen who fails to pay his tax should expect fire, not only the Nnkaa people, and you know that. That was the decision

we took in Council.'

'But Nwuoupang cannot just divide us like this, Tsa-apifor!' Ama'a protested.

'You should have said so in Council, now Asobo-Ntsi cannot speak alone without the others. But the problem is not Nwuoupang; it is Nyen and the people of Nyen.'

'Nyen and the people of Nyen did not pay tax until Nwuoupang asked us to, my lord.'

'You are right, Ama'a. But you are wrong to think that we can just ask Nwuoupang to go back to his country. And it is not for him that I am doing this; it is for the sake of Nyen and the people of Nyen. Just see how much Tipah is gaining from Nwuoupang because they too burned down houses. No, Ama'a, Asobo-Ntsi never changes his word when it is for the good of Nyen!' His tone had become sober and the last words came out almost in a whisper, heavy with emotion. 'You will tell Nnkaa what I have told you.'

'You know them better, Mbe-e, they will say they never sent me to Asobo-Ntsi.'

'That sounds like rebellion already?' Asobo-Ntsi's voice was cold with awareness.

The two men looked up abruptly as footsteps hurried toward the door from outside and without any announcement the door burst open and Medakih came in his face distorted by fright.

'What is the matter now, you fool?' Asobo-Ntsi said.

'The Nnkaa ...' Medakih began and as suddenly checked himself after recognising Ama'a and began working his mouth like a natural stammerer.

'Go on you fool,' Asobo-Ntsi said in a repressed tone, 'you do not know Ama'a again?'

'The ... Nnkaa women, my lord,' Medakih said tentatively.

'I heard you already, what about them?'

'They are at the palace entrance, Tsa-apifor, threatening to break in and talk with the lion!'

Asobo-Ntsi turned to Ama'a who has remained unruffled ever since Medakih came in.

'Who has organised this?' he said.

'You are accusing me already, Tsa-apifor!' he said almost laughing; 'they are your citizens and only my children. In fact I am only the baby-sitter!'

‘Then I will act like their leader!’ His voice was again decisive as he turned to Medakih, rage in his eyes. ‘Go and tell them that I am discussing with Ama’a and that I cannot talk with them when they disobey me and encourage their husbands to do same. Mafor will talk with them.’

After Medakih left the room the two were silent for a while, each searching through his thoughts. It was Asobo-Ntsi who broke the silence from an unexpected angle.

‘Now, tell me,’ he said, ‘there is another of your meetings planned for this evening. What is to be discussed there?’

Ama’a looked up startled.

‘You are spying on Nnkaa, Tsa-apifor,’ he cried out in blunt reclamation, no longer caring about the mood of Asobo-Ntsi.

‘It is only my duty to know everything that is going on in my land, and Ama’a knows that.’

‘Then I cannot say for now,’ Ama’a said in reluctant concession; ‘we should wait for the meeting to be over first.’

The now familiar footfalls of Medakih were again heard rushing in without heed for protocol.

‘They say no, Tsa-apifor, that Mafor cannot solve their problems, that she was not the one who ordered Tongari to burn their houses and also burn their children; that ...’

‘That is enough!’ Asobo-Ntsi said in a wearied voice. ‘Tell them that if they cannot see Mafor they should wait. I am still discussing with Ama’a and can only see them after that.’

Medakih left. His footsteps could be heard in sluggish dragging. He too was already worn out by the pressures of the day. That was the other side of royal favours, Asobo-Ntsi mused, confident that very soon it will be all over.

‘Now, this talk of burned children,’ he said to Ama’a, ‘is it true?’

‘I have not heard of it, my lord,’ Ama’a said; ‘but anything is possible, given the way you allow Tongari to act. They seem to have more powers now than even Kwi’for. You should not accept gifts for them from Nwuoupang, my lord. These get into their heads and make them feel they are equal to Nwuoupang.’

‘But the people always know what to do,’ Asobo-Ntsi said meekly, ‘nobody is supposed to be in a targeted house, and nothing else is supposed to be taken out of it. If somebody is burned in a

house then he stayed there deliberately and Asobo-Ntsi cannot be blamed. Are you not going to discuss it during your meeting this evening?’

‘I have told Asobo-Ntsi what I know.’

‘Then Asobo-Ntsi does not believe Ama’a, now. Only the male crab knows location of the female crab’s womb.’

‘Then may be Ama’a is not the true male crab that Asobo-Ntsi thinks he is. But the women are waiting for the lion.’

‘You are right. Perhaps they will tell me what you cannot,’ he said ironically.

Then he unhurriedly got up, majesty returning into his gait, and stepped out, Ama’a after him.

It was in the inner palace courtyard that Asobo-Ntsi received the women. He had asked only for their leaders, first because he could easily manage the relatively small numbers, and also because it would be prudent to identify those he could call to order whenever necessary. He sat expansively on the royal stool casually dressed – having gone back into his chambers on the insistence of Ama’a to look less formal and therefore less intimidating – puffing at his pipe. Cho-Muluh, as usual, was squatted in his habitually twisted heap, cuddling the huge pipe as if it were his great grand father’s head.

Three women entered in a stooping line and in a chorus uttered their ululation in a low tone.

‘Tsa-apifor!’ Ntsa-a greeted, ‘the women of Nnkaa greet you!’

‘Fon more than Fons!’ Maantoh hooted, ‘we greet you in tears!’

Asobo-Ntsi smiled at them, each in turn, acknowledging their praises. His people had forced him to accept and even expect such flattery; they never tire of singing his praises even when they should be cursing him, like now, with Azah stepping forward in line after the other two to offer her own praises, clapping with cupped hands.

‘Worthy father, husband, and son of the land,’ she said, ‘we implore you now to listen to our woes!’

Then in a chorus, led by Azah, they ululated again before retreating to the corner.

Asobo-Ntsi straightened up and gently pushed the pipe away

and at the same time nodding at Cho-Muluh to withdraw. Then he hemmed with ceremonial wantonness and the women again ululated, tittering their praises.

‘Tsa-apifor!’ Ntsa-a said.

‘Nyamtima!’ Azah echoed.

Asobo-Ntsi smiled at them broadly, in the only moment of royal sunlight for the day.

‘I have heard your supplications and thank you for coming to me when troubled. The head cannot sleep well when one has a swollen toe.’ He was keenly observing the women to notice if the stiff look in their eyes could surrender to his words. ‘You know,’ he continued, ‘that these are issues the Fon cannot handle properly. Even my notables will never satisfy you. That is why I asked Mafor to talk to you. She is one of you, and knows your troubles than either me or my notables.’

‘We heard the lion’s messenger,’ Azah said stepping forward to emphasise her point; ‘and would never challenge his word, only that the messenger informed us that the lion also heard our message.’

‘I did, Azah,’ Asobo-Ntsi admitted, baffled at the unstaggering boldness of the women. ‘I would have loved to talk to all the daughters of Awa-nkaa, but your husbands have not constructed a bigger hall for me; that is why I only asked for the leaders.’ He paused and surveyed them with cunning simplicity and when he spoke his voice was mellowed with characteristic humility, almost condescending and faltering. ‘I hear the women of Nnkaa are angry with me?’

Ntsa-a stepped forward slightly stooped.

‘No, ‘Tsa-apifor,’ she said, ‘they are only angry with the manner in which Tongari is treating them!’

‘Then maybe we have to send Tongari away?’

‘Yes, ‘Tsa-apifor! We do not want Tongari any more! We are tired of Tongari! We did not know Tongari before Nwuoupang arrived and houses were never burned.’

Their sudden chorus against Tongari took Asobo-Ntsi by surprise; he seemed to have underestimated the strength of collective determination.

‘Then what will happen when I remind you that as mothers of the land, you are also spitting fire against your son who is cursed to be your leader?’ He was fitting his tongue back into the right mood

of expression, enticing the women in their own self-indulgence. 'It is true that without your anger once in a while, he may forget himself sometimes and act like a stranger against his own people. But Nnkaa women know that their Fon cannot work without Tongari. Anyone who is angry with Tongari is angry with Asobo-Ntsi. Tongari is only a messenger.'

'Then Tsa-apifor should remind Tongari again,' Azah said, tilting her neck like a bride soliciting some favour from the husband, 'what they should do and what they should not do. They burned all my kapa, Tsa-apifor, which I collected after selling my cocoyams for the whole season!' Her voice trembled with emotion, and it was evident that she would break down if she continued to talk for long.

'That is very unfortunate, Azah,' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'but it is Asobo-Ntsi who burned your houses and not Tongari.'

'How can that be, your highness,' Azah said, 'when I really saw Tad-tipong with my own eyes?'

'He was only my servant, carrying the flame that I put in his hands.'

'And our children, Mbe-e, burned too in sleep!' Maantoh who had been silent burst out.

'I was just chatting with Ama'a and he said no child had been burned.'

'How can Mbe-e expect Azama-a to say anything different from what the lion wishes?' Ntsa-a said. 'He is also your servant, Tsa-apifor.'

Asobo-Ntsi smiled. The women were proving to be even more formidable against his person than the men.

'That is also true,' he said; 'but remember that his first duty is to take care of my people under him. So he cannot tell me that which is not correct else I also act incorrectly. He already has all that he deserves from me, so why should he speak falsely?'

'So what are we to tell the women of Nnkaa, Tsa-apifor?' Azah said with veiled impatience in her tone.

'Tell them their son and servant thanks them very much for coming to him in a moment of distress; otherwise he will never know all that is happening in the land.' This was the part of formal ceremonies that Asobo-Ntsi loved best, to express himself in concluding phrases that fell from his lips like a shutting door. He gave no room for further dialogue after that and so made sure that

his whole personality was weighted in the speech. He no longer hemmed for the expected reaction, and when he swayed it was in a mastered rhythm that awed and baffled the onlookers at the same time. 'Tell the women of Nnkaa too that I will look into their petition like a son, and make them happy once more. But that will only be after I return from Atisong. And that by wishing to send Tongari away, they are also breaking my arm and encouraging their husbands to be lazy and headstrong. Did they too not pebble me on the day I was made their servant, so that I can bear all their burdens properly?'

'They did, Tsa-apifor!' the women chorused.

'Then why do they choose to fight against me now, and seek to break my arm? I am only trying to do that which they burdened me to do, tell them that. And to make them believe you, Mafor will arrange with Waah for you to take gifts to Nnkaa women as a token of my concern.'

He had ended, and the women knew it. Whether or not they were satisfied, was a different thing, but they knew it was over. As Asobo-Ntsi rose and walked out, back into the inner palace, the women ululated in dance, exhibiting contorting rhythms with their abdomens, celebrating the entente with Asobo-Ntsi.

Chapter Eleven

And in the midst of uncertainty, Nyen sought refuge in past glory if only to confront the moment.

Nkhefor, the aboriginal lord had sighed in contentment, assessing the arrivants, and demanded loyalty against the threat of instant death. Threatened by the influx he was witnessing, and himself a threat to the future he dreaded, Nkhefor snarled displeasures and Tenghehfeng, whose God had slipped into Nkhefor's favourite pool, would not sleep until the aboriginal forehead with wriggling streaks of manhood was humbled. How long shall his people pay unmerited dues at the Menguoua crossing on their way to trade at Nko'mbu?

But Nkhefor with the broad chest and lone-boned arm snarled still in ridiculous defiance, surveying his territory with raw greed and dread, wondering why he should make peace with the invaders he despised, people he never invited. No alien ever crossed Nkhefor's path without paying with blood if they resisted enslavement to the lord of the jungle. So he taxed Tenghehfeng and his people as they decided to stay and loaded his barns with the sweat of Nyen until Tenghehfeng devised a plan and lured terror into the pit with piked sticks and itching leaves, camouflaged with twigs and dry leaves. No, they would not approach Nkhefor and perform their rites of loyalty, and if he wanted his gifts, Tenghehfeng challenged, then Nkhefor must come for them, in person. Terrible standoff never dreamed of, crude affront against the terror of Nyen. In a mad rush, holding back his escorts, and determined to decapitate heads in his wake, Nkhefor strode across his doom and suddenly gasped in fear, mighty Nkhefor, on the edge of knowledge, only too late.

Terrible cry of pain that tore from the bowels of earth through the mountain reaches, as tall Nkhefor whimpered and cursed the trickery below; but foresaw even darker days ahead to ransom his fate, he screamed at last, when violence unappeased shall beget violence in Nyen.

Shocked by the unexpected, his followers either summoned

their heels for safety or were captured and subdued; but because Nkhefor had chosen Tisagli's pool for ancestral dialogue, only one of Nkhefor's blood could rein in the anger. Mmahshi, his beloved grandson was given the gourd, and Ndindoh the step-brother whose feet knew every path in the land, had their ancestral horn for communal summons.

By the time the sun was crossing the threshold, the main palace courtyard was filled with the population. The people had started trickling into the palace as soon as the sun started peeping out of its night house, and secured convenient spots for whatever Asobo-Ntsi had to tell them. Further off where the huge fig trees skirted the palace boundaries, young boys made their way onto the broad branches that spread out like huge wings. The talking was a low sustained rumble, resembling the echo of Mitanyen on a typical Ntare, caught on the wind from a distance. Some, particularly the women, had come with their rain mats, which they now spread over their heads against the stinging sun. Two sheds had been constructed with raffia fronds, flanking the ceremonial grounds, in which the titled men were seated, chewing their kolanuts and talking.

There was apprehension on the faces that otherwise looked quite casual, only chatting the way they always do, on ceremonial outings. For that was also when they met old friends and relatives they had not met for long and endeavoured to recall every bit of information and make plans while they can.

The people got up very early with their anxious faces turned toward the palace and their greetings echoed their wandering minds. Kwi'for had spent the whole night rushing to every corner of the village, spitting out daring incantations that forebode some serious business. Then as the fowls began to fly from the trees and other roosting nests propped up against the wall, the hollow notes of the huge palace gong confirmed their worries. The message was clear or so they thought; they were being summoned to the palace, everybody, man, woman, and child. The general understanding was that Asobo-Ntsi had a very important declaration to make. Consequently there was to be no farming, no meetings and travels. Everybody had been summoned to follow their feet to the palace.

A short distance away from the royal stool on a raised dais made of roped poles and decorated with plaited fibre, a huge pot had been positioned. Even those who had not confirmed the rumours about the royal summons immediately understood what was at stake immediately they spotted the pot. It was the ngvouré ritual and as the people flocked in and found a place for their buttocks, anxiety rose at the expectations that usually resulted from every ngvouré administration. There were those who will be glad to see scores settled for them in a non-committal way by royal sanction, and those who were just there for the fun of either exposure or vindication.

Three sturdy men were standing around the pot, bare from the waist upward. Their biceps glistened with python fats against scathing sun, and their faces were masks without emotion. They stared ahead in fixed wooden postures, seeing everything as if blind, and once in a while, as those closest to them could attest, their lips would twist in an ugly snarl, and yet without expression.

Suddenly Ndindoh made a hasty entrance and immediately the murmurings died down.

‘Nyen-Mechop!’ he called out in a stern, vibrating voice that trembled with mastered feeling. And almost immediately the palace guards made their entry closely followed by Asobo-Ntsi and his Notables. This was the supreme moment of his majesty, when he consciously swayed to the confounding salutations of his people, suffocating him. His steps were measured to the hooting of the men in particular, uttered in stuttering interjections that made the warring hearts hunger for action. The women stringed out piercing ululations, shedding their mouths with their hands and chained up the eerie chant in an unending chorus. Asobo-Ntsi was then the animal that no mortal can aim at, nyamtimah, undulating on the sway of their praise, the wind that has no abode, a child with no father or mother. Yet, at the same time, he was the garden eggs that must be harvested at road junctions, to feed the hungry mouths now making him royally aware in tribute. The royal entourage made its way to the main courtyard and the notables waited for Asobo-Ntsi to sit first. As they settled down the titled men began rubbing their palms together in prelude to the ceremonial greeting reserved for royalty, three thunderous handclaps, echoing into the woods, on behalf of Asobo-Ntsi to his people.

Asobo-Ntsi was flanked by his notables, who sat according to

their 'house' and rank, either looking into their bags for a lobe or a snuff tube, or comNtiyng on something. Apart from two of the guards who were squatting in front of the royal stool on either side of the Fon, the rest of the guards were at the rear of the shed anticipating every move by Asobo-Ntsi.

From the side door into the yard, shaded by a fibre blind weird cries could be heard accompanied by the intermittent rolling of drums. The atmosphere was charged with expectation, so alert were the people, waiting to see and hear. They never tire of witnessing the drama exorcising those with two stomachs.

Then Ti-ndoh emerged from the shaded entrance as the tempo of the drumming heightened. He was dressed as if for battle, with strings of amulet falling down his chest and tied to a silver ring round his neck. He was wielding a spear dotted with black and white and as he cantered into the yard with forward and backwards movements, he shook the spear in challenging salutations first to Asobo-Ntsi who leapt up and returned the salute, displaying his fly whip. Then Ti-ndoh trotted around the yard, giving each group its due salute in return for appropriate gesticulations. In a last wild swirl he planted himself in front of Asobo-Ntsi in a menacing pose that was rewarded with a royal nod.

'When the lion roars at noon,' Ti-ndoh began, 'all the animals of the wild must stop and listen! The mid-day roar of lion is the sign of great and terrible things to happen all from the same womb, and today, Nyen-Mechop, Asobo-Ntsi, lion more than lion, roars!'

There was a brief rolling of drums from within as Ti-ndoh skipped about in measured steps.

'The lion prowls the forest fearlessly in his pride because he cannot be challenged by either kin or enemy. Asobo-Ntsi, it is you I salute! The lion that must trample its kind, if it must, to have passage: I await your bidding!'

Then as suddenly as he appeared Ti-ndoh disappeared into the shrine to the intensified rolling of drums.

Asobo-Ntsi then got up as the women showered him with ululations and advanced forward, gently rolling the folds of his gown up his arms. He cleared his throat amidst another frenzy of ululations.

'Nyen-Mechop,' he began, 'put my mouth in your ears! It is not often that we assemble here in this manner. So many things are

wrong in the land and we cannot just sit and fold our arms and watch. Princes are seizing the wives of princes; people are refusing to pay tax and then complain about the actions of Tongari; secret meetings are held at night, planning rebellion; and innocent children are dying every day because of witches and wizards in our midst.' He paused a bit and paced about like a man recollecting his thoughts.

'When you accepted me as Fon and pebbled me with all your woes, you also told me what to do and what not to do. I have tried to do what you asked me to do, and the only thing you asked me never to do was to allow Nyen crawl in the shit of her own darkness. The safety and progress of the land and its people rests on my lone shoulders: I never sleep all night because of the load on my shoulders.'

He paused again. He was now standing on a fixed spot and turned from one direction to another to emphasise his speech as if he was addressing invisible presences.

'Today people say Asobo-Ntsi is a tyrant simply because he still remembers the words that carried the spittle that wrapped the pebbles that were aimed at him. Your communal ritual was a sign for me to rule like a true ruler. That is why I must stand by my words and actions at all times when Nyen is threatened.'

The silence in the yard was impressive. Here and there a man sneezed or a woman coughed, but they were all caught up in the suspense of Asobo-Ntsi's words rolling on the wind like the story of the land weaved in a sigh.

'Nwuoupang's messenger has been here several times to collect tax money. I dispatched Sa'amontoh to Atisong this morning, still tired as he was from our hunt, to tell Nwuoupang that I will be ready on Ngheyu. That is why Tongari is out and nobody will stop them. Concerning the night meetings let the organisers know that we would not accept that which should not be! I cannot live to see my land fall to pieces because of stubbornness no matter its source.' His face was now a grave mask that revealed nothing. He gathered the loose folds of his gown before pointing at the entrance into which Ti-ndoh had disappeared.

'Now, for the main reason why I summoned you here today, we will soon know those who want to make my people eternal mourners. The whole land would have been calm now if not of Mecham's family from where I hear wailings every night. Ti-ndoh has

prepared his wine and we will watch all those who have been accused drink of it. Those who are not guilty will stand on their feet and walk back home with us. This is our wish, just as it has always been.'

There was a prolonged rolling of drums with the faint fluttering sound of the manderè flute. As the sound intensified a group of some fifteen suspects came in from the shrine entrance. They were all aged men and women, stunned by exposure to public scrutiny. They squinted against the public onslaught, exposed, as the crowd rumbled into low derisive comments. The three sturdy men directed them accordingly round the ngvouré pot. Asobo-Ntsi had stepped back a bit, a satisfied look on his face. When all the suspects had been positioned he flung his arms open as if it were imperative he justified himself.

'The seven pillars of Piegha' and Awa-nkaa,' he began, 'should now bear us witness in this act. Our desire is not to destroy but to mend. Nyen is not just for today but also for tomorrow and no one should be allowed to put out the sun when it is still rising from her bed.'

Then he turned to the suspects.

'You have been brought here by your own kinsmen. So do not say your enemies have done this to you. Mecham bears us witness.'

His head suddenly snapped in the manner of an adder snake about to strike as he surveyed the assembly spread out on the palace slope.

'Let the man or woman who says no to this solemn act of cleansing stand up now and say why we must not go on.' He paused and again swept his eyes over the crowd of mute watchers, anxious with anticipation.

'Nyen-Mechop,' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'we shall always stand by our pledge to see that our people sleep peacefully and grow. Now, Ti-ndoh!' he suddenly cried out, 'living terror of night walkers, show my people our wish! The innocent shall remain friends but the guilty shall be shown the way to the Cliff of Death, may I see Piegha' with my eyes again!'

A loud flourish, mixed with human exaltations, accompanied Asobo-Ntsi to his stool, tall and not human in his stride. He felt reinstated, suddenly, enthroned once more to the unsoiled pedestal of royalty, swaying in the heat of popular acclamation, the recent

distractions already forgotten. Presently, Ti-ndoh entered as before, and trotted from one end of the courtyard to the other in a silent and intimidatory exhibition of strength. His face appeared puckered after successive layers of chalk with streaks of camwood running from the ridge of his nose to the edges of his face. He was in the realm of the Gods. Pregnant women present rubbed their faces vigorously and shuddered in the aftermath of his premonitory entrance and approach, silently muttering under their breath to shake off the unwanted face. Then Ti-ndoh jumped into the semi-circle of suspects and took his time from face to face, staring at each of them in turn in frightful scrutiny. When he was through he stepped back and bowed to Asobo-Ntsi.

‘The hunter feeds his dog before urging it into the thicket, Tsa-apifor!’ he said. ‘Who says the chameleon should live if by it we cannot live?’

He looked around wildly as if anticipating an adversary.

‘Haaa!’ he cried, ‘the smoking coal must leave the fire place or else we all become blind if we do not abandon the hut. And we cannot abandon the hut. But I do not speak for myself – who am I? Just the spice of the Gods and the mouthpiece of Asobo-Ntsi! How then can I speak for myself since I cannot reward myself? I speak for the Gods and await my kola, Tsa-apifor!’

In three quick steps he reached Asobo-Ntsi’s stool and squatted, as the Fon brought out a huge kolanut from his bag. Ti-ndoh snatched it and with one savage bite split it in two. The crackle, as he chewed, brought subdued laughter from those closest to him. Even laughter rivalled death in such solemn moments. Then satisfied he walked back to the ritual spot.

‘Let it never be said that Ti-ndoh served the wine of the Gods without tasting of it,’ he said, and dipped a wooden bowl into the pot and drank. Then he served the three sturdy men in turn who then proceeded to serve the suspects while Ti-ndoh resumed his jogging and incantation.

‘Anyone with a clean stomach,’ he said, ‘will never groan from the sting of our brew, but the man with a black stomach will not accompany us back home. Mother bed bog told her children not to panic; the fire in their home will soon die out, she said. Nothing remains hot forever. Nyen-Mechop, who challenges the sacred pot with a black stomach and still stands on their feet? Do your work,

ngvouré, let smoke not blind us because of a bad coal, do your work! Let the man who has a clean stomach stand up and go home, yes! Rats are skipping over his meal. Ngvouré, spare and do not spare!

He paused for breath and appeared visibly dazed. Beads of sweat were breaking from the coating of chalk and coursed down his cheeks making him look really beastly. A sneering laugh was on his face as he watched the suspects, already served, amused by their mixed reaction. Some began to wriggle, standing on the same spot; others either clasped their stomachs or clawed at their throats and retched violently, while others looked on as if amazed by the whole ceremony, day-dreaming. Then suddenly some began to act in fits, kicking out and gasping for breath. There was a sustained rolling of drums accompanied by wild cheers from the crowd, spontaneously cheering, booing and hooting. Caught in the frenzy and fired by it, Ti-ndoh's pitch intensified accordingly.

'Aha, ngvouré!' he puttered, 'show the hawk that deprives the hen of her chick! Show the owl that hoots despair at midnight and spits into the wombs of our women, show!'

He was excited and sprang about like a loose bull after an abortive castration attempt. Some of the suspects were still standing. The others had collapsed and were either lying face down or on their backs, perfectly still. One or two still kicked out feebly, as Ti-ndoh inspected them, counting in silence.

'Asobo-Ntsi, I salute you again!' Ti-ndoh cried anew in jubilant revelation. 'Great lion and protector of Nyen, seven black stomachs have been cured by our concoction, five men and two women! May the violent storm pass at night! Great warrior, I have done my job and now await my prize!'

The palace precincts were now a spell of silence. Ti-Ndoh hob-danced to a corner and squatted. The sturdy men followed his example, but unlike him they walked with a heavy gloom on their faces. Anyone familiar with the ritual understood their long sullen faces. While people will be returning home with varying and modified stories to relate, the three men still had a very long and cold night ahead of them during which time they prepared the corpses and then kept watch over them till midnight. Very often some daring kinsman, probably a living accomplice, would venture into the wooded cliff to drag away a body for proper burial at the boundary of Nyen.

But Asobo-Ntsi was pleased with himself; he was revived,

anyone could see it as he slowly stood up with cultivated majestic impulse, and moved toward the corpses to rhythmic ululation. He surveyed them several times before turning to Ti-ndoh.

‘Thank you, worthy son of Awa-nkaa,’ he said. ‘Nyen can never pay you enough. We owe you a great debt. Nyen-Mechop,’ and he turned to his notables and then to the population spread out on the slope inclining toward the palace, ‘you have all witnessed the justice of the Gods. The waters of Qwang will not allow us to have bad nights any more; the herbs of Tisagli too are the cure for black stomachs.’

He surveyed the surviving suspects as if he was not aware of their presence all along. He smiled at them broadly, showing his teeth and nodding at the same time.

‘Return to your homes, harmless citizens,’ he said. ‘Do not say the people wished for your death; they only wanted to be sure of your love, and now they can share your cup and kola without fear. These others,’ and he pointed at the corpses with disdain, ‘with whom you walked into our royal place do not deserve to be amongst us and the Gods have done justice. Before the sun goes down today,’ he added, addressing the three sturdy fellows, ‘their ears and nostrils must be waxed to ward off any contamination, and then tumble them down the Cliff of Death at the silent moment. And as is our custom no man, wife, child, or husband, shall mourn them. Nyen-Mechop,’ he said with finality, ‘our wish is done.’

As he walked away and back into the palace, Asobo-Ntsi felt he was invested anew with powers he secretly feared had left him. A new spring came into his limbs and he was only half conscious of the ovation that ushered him into the inner palace. Ndiyzé will then clean up the place, after which Mmahshi would perform the cleansing act. The village was rallying back again, Asobo-Ntsi knew, and as he walked back, and talking and responding to people without knowing, he was already sketching his trips to Atisong and Ala’papah in his mind. He was one again with his people and the Gods of the land and how else could his victory be hailed if not by extending the handshake to his friends out of the land? The palace echoed in his ears like a throb of happiness, and he sighed in acknowledgement.

It was such a tempting evening Asobo-Ntsi could hardly remember when he felt so sensationally alive. His mind was however not completely with him; it still hovered away from him and retraced every moment of the day, re-visiting the highlights of his glorious utterance, and with a wane smile of self-indulgence he knew Nyen was still what it was meant to be. He had seen the mud that caked on his people's feet from swampy banks as they drag out a livelihood from decayed branches, refusing to give up. He himself had hastened the will to persist, applying camwood to their scars, and they had hailed him in compensation. They had, yes, until recently, Asobo-Ntsi reflected feeling a tight cram around his bowels, when strong heads had threatened his stance. He almost groped in the darkness of their endeavour, challenging him and putting his authority to question. But today, he was re-established; he re-possessed the reins of Nyen, and felt the blood in his veins diluted only by too much desire to offer his people all he longed to.

He was in his bedroom alone, isolated and abstract. The smoke popping out of his lips made him look like a statue, old and beyond time. The lurid light from the aladin lamp that Nwuoupang offered him gave him the feeling of sitting in a shrine and expecting a voice from beyond. It was his fancy, at such moments, to think of his father whose love had burdened him, Asobo-Ntsi, with the woes of his people. In his smoke-dyed singlet over a puffy ntoum, Asobo-Ntsi thought of how much Nwuoupang had altered things in his land. He felt bitter at times, wishing things could revert back to the days before Nwuoupang when desire was limited to the fingertips that scratched the earth for maggots that would spice the family dish in the evening. He could recall the day his father had vowed to die if he could not send away Tipah from the Mafor-Nyen hill, the major farmland of the people. Nwuoupang had conspired against him, the old Fon had moaned, the first Nwuoupang, who broke the backs of all the males in Nyen with stones to raise the house of his God at Ntanfang in Tipah. But he was driven away by his own brothers, armed against him, and the new Nwuoupang brought peace between Nyen and Tipah and almost made the two Fons friends again. Still, the old Fon had taken his anger against Nwuoupang with him to the grave, cautioning his people against the long-necked vultures hovering over the land.

There was a knock on the door, so light Asobo-Ntsi had to

wait for it a second time to be sure he was not dreaming.

‘Who is there?’ his voice rang out in the quiet night.

‘I am the one, my lord. May I come in?’ It was Wopong’s voice, tentative and unsure. He could feel her tremble with uncertain anxiety for royal corrosiveness.

‘What do you want now?’ he called out with a reprimanding edge to his voice; ‘come in.’

The door opened with a creak and Wopong slipped into the room like a woman on her first secret date on a moonlit night. As the youngest of his Queens, Asobo-Ntsi knew that she deserved special treatment, which recent events have compromised, and he almost felt hurt himself. She was slim and had braided her thick hair into fat snaky strands that resembled the heavy beads around her neck. She had thrown on a loin over her breasts as if she had been in a haste; the loin barely covered her thighs, and she smelled of minyanga oil.

‘I have not sent for you,’ Asobo-Ntsi said as soon as she came in and squatted besides him, her head against his thigh; ‘why should you come on your own?’

‘My heart is heavy, my lord,’ she began, ‘so Mafor urged me to come and see you. I am sure something terrible is going to happen, my lord. My left eye has been trembling now for three days.’

‘Have you heard of something, then?’

‘No, my lord, nothing...’ Wopong said.

‘Then it is only a restive feeling after all what we have been going through,’ Asobo-Ntsi cut in.

‘Only the meetings that my people have been holding at night, my lord,’ she went on. ‘They are angry, my lord; you should do something, else they will do something desperate. I know my people,’ she said with conviction.

‘Then let them do it! I am ready for them and that is why I cannot sleep now.’ It was always confounding, the manner in which he put his words against her people, Wopong thought, almost as if they did not have a right to voice their anger. It was unfair the way they were treated, she thought.

‘Let them try,’ Asobo-Ntsi was saying, ‘then they will know who I, Asobo-Ntsi really is! Now you can go back to your house. I do not need you tonight.’

He spoke with such finality Wopong found it hard to stand up.

‘But my lord?’ she implored, beginning to cuddle his slightly exposed torso.

‘No, woman, not tonight,’ he said, ‘I may change my mind tomorrow, but until then tell Mafor not to act without consulting me.’

‘Sleep well then, my lord,’ the woman said, the tremble returning to her voice.

Asobo-Ntsi did not respond. He heard the door creak back into place and clicked to with a snap. He was always waiting for the click and felt a sensation that he could not describe, resulting from the gadget that Nwuoupang had fitted to his doors. The click tickled him somewhere, and seemed to connect him ever so strongly, to Nwuoupang. And he always resolved, after each click, to get what he could from Nwuoupang for his people, only he did not have to make his people slaves to Nwuoupang. He resumed his smoking-puffing from a smaller, private pipe, almost with an unknown vengeance against everything unnameable that kept him up. He knew it was going to be a long night, so he could just as well spend part of it smoking and brooding.

Chapter Twelve

The old man had spoken in grey vowels and even greyer consonants, Tella'a concluded, recounting what had been recounted over the generations from distanced Memory: but he, reading his books that supplanted Memory, and then listening to the many voices of teachers that groomed him at every stage of the way, was to confront a faceless story that was meant to become his, faceless because there were too many voices calling forth their own faces and forcing them into his vision. Until he started believing the celebrated national historian who, he now understood, was also a victim of shrouded voices. How was he to disentangle himself and isolate his people from the web of voices twisting his brain cords saying, I am the voice, the one and only voice?

Awa-nkaa was suddenly restive, stirring out of his cramps. After what seemed endless seasons of dull inactivity his once valiant heart was beating again. He felt alive again and his heart listened for echoes from the past, memories that divulged manhood from the labs of fear and arraigned it against the fangs of a merciless foe, snarling, and the only redeeming act was to grasp the raw steel of the spear, and clasp it with a look that told the onlookers, You all, know that I am a man of responsibility, yes I am! I will bite blood out of steel! But all that had seemed a distant memory all so suddenly, and Awa-nkaa nearly stumbled over the comfort of indulgent surrender, denying himself, his past and accepting the lie that was no longer himself. Nnkaa still looked up to him and counted on his opinion, but lately alienated voices began calling him names, even insinuating cowardice as the only thing that remained of his once-upon-a-time valour.

He had smiled when he heard of it, his own self-indulgence refusing to go away with the rest of his attributes; his smile was an asset he will take to his grave, he often told those who claimed authority over anger. He had looked at Tita in his wry way, knowing

that Tita was not only his informant now, but in fact one of those propagating his cowardice because they wanted to spill blood as testimony of manhood.

‘Do our people not often say that it is a coward who ensures procreation after war?’ His voice will ring out with feeble vibrancy, echoing a past.

But suddenly, during the very brief moment of an evening, all of that had changed. His detractors seemed to have been justified in their assessment of his position on the issue of Nnkaa revolt against Asobo-Ntsi, Awa-nkaa mused, for he felt so much peace now with his mind after giving his consent to their decision.

The meeting had been brief and consensus unanimous. The people knew what to do even before they came to his place, Awa-nkaa realized, and would have defied his conservative stance in any case. They were ready for battle, and did not hide the fact, nor did they waste time over idle arguments of who was right and who was wrong.

After details of the ceremony at the palace had been digested, it was agreed that Asobo-Ntsi had not only ignored the burning Nnkaa issue, but had in fact dared them to prove that they were men! Cries of anger rose in the small group gathered around the oil lamp, and Awa-nkaa knew that the only thing for him to do was to nod his consent. No sooner did he do this than other cries, now humble and suppliant, rose from the men, almost deifying him.

‘Tsa-apifor!’ they hailed him and one or two of them wiped their eyes while others shook their heads. Memory rushed back into their very midst, recalling what had been, then was lost and could only be hoped for through the many seasons of frustration and humiliation. They were denying the dark nights of their dissatisfaction, how could they have assisted in the frustration of Nnkaa and her children? Now that they knew what to do, nothing will stop them!

Even while they paid allegiance to Asobo-Ntsi, each of his Chiefs had his own traditional corps, autonomous in some cases that directly mirrored the bigger structures of Nyen. So it was not difficult for Nnkaa traditional institutions to be constituted overnight, rallied into action as if they had been there from the very beginning of time. The Seven and Nine King-Makers were confirmed, a mere formality for the contingent moment, a War Council was appointed and from

these institutions Kwi'for was formed.

Wine was brought in and the rituals of confirmation were quickly performed. The men felt a new kinship binding them as Awa-nkaa's horn was passed from mouth to mouth in the dark enclosure. It was a new experience, one they had known would one day come, and so had expected it with the anxiety of children waiting for the first rains. Now they were all tickled in their mutual understanding of what was to come, and also ready for it, they suddenly felt happy. For Asobo-Ntsi was certain to go mad and roar like a mad dog in the night. But the people were resolved, their hearts echoed their resolution awaited for so long and caught between palpitating hope and awkward frustration. But now they felt strong and could dare Asobo-Ntsi, having invested their Kwi'for with the spiritual authority of the ancestors.

The men returned to the shady room beating their chests and realizing for the first time what it was to feel like men, strong and unbending. Maybe they had always felt like this, but had never really realized the full potential of their ability, echoed in one heartbeat. Since time was against them, Kwi'for had to set to work at once. It was to inform Nnkaa of the ultimate decision to break away from Nyen after repeated seasons of insult during which they were always hoping Asobo-Ntsi would understand and at least address their problems. But the people were not to jubilate for it was not a victory; if anything it was a tearful parting for the fight had indeed been one of elbows. There was to be calm and further instructions were to follow from the palace as Awa-nkaa's compound was to be called from that night.

After Kwi'for had left, the remaining elders gathered around the fire to wait for the first reports of their action. They began talking excitedly, ignoring Awa-nkaa. They talked of making contacts with other villages as soon as possible, and enlisting the friendship of Nwuoupang. Awa-nkaa listened to them from the distance of his own thoughts, stringing them around his shadowy vision for Nnkaa when nothing could be helped no longer. Once in a while he caught the eerie sounds of his Kwi'for borne on the night wind. He tried to imagine the reactions of the people, first of shock and then with realization, the satisfaction that comes after a turbulence of storms and hooting owls flapping their wings across the restive land.

It seemed a long time since Asobo-Ntsi was leaning against his stool engulfed by the smoke of his pipe. He had even dosed off and in a fitful dream had been embracing Wopong in the open arena of the palace, and forcing her in public against her will. The passers-by had shielded their faces and sneaked away as Asobo-Ntsi had fastened his grip, invigorated by the heart-rending notes of mandere, screaming, 'Woman, you are my queen and must submit!' Then the struggle became a love-dance, but the two instead swayed in clumsy steps almost tripping each other. But the music was soon discordant and the more Asobo-Ntsi tried to disentangle himself, the more Wopong clung to him, suddenly afraid, preventing him from breaking away. The Fon became desperate, he must break away and find his rhythm again, and with a last frantic effort he tore himself from Wopong at the same time that his left hand swung around and crashed into his private gourd with a mute bang.

He opened his eyes and felt cold beads of sweat on his forehead and silently surveyed the scattered pieces of calabash in awe, wondering. Then he heard the faintly sounds of Kwi'for, rising and falling, and knew immediately that he had not really been dreaming. His mind had been fighting all along against what he was only then aware of. In a snappy move he seized the aladin lamp still throwing lurid rays over the room and darted out. His immediate instinct was to rush out of the palace and trail the accursed sound, which he had anticipated for several nights now, and confront it in a physical duel. But he dashed instead into Cho-Muluh's room and seized the snoring boy by the neck. A stifled scream came from his throat as his eyes popped open and then a look of awe came into his eyes as he recognised Asobo-Ntsi. Then almost immediately he heard footsteps outside rushing toward his chambers.

'Who is there?' he called, coming out. Medakih and Dampoulou were standing there with lit bamboo splinters in their hands almost burned out. They were breathing with difficulty and looked distracted.

'What horrible sound is this that disturbs my sleep?' Asobo-Ntsi screamed.

‘An abomination, Tsa-apifor!’ Medakih blurted. ‘A terrible abomination!’ he added.

‘You will never imagine it, Tsa-apifor!’ Dampoulou echoed.

‘How is it then? Tell me now or I lose my temper!’ Asobo-Ntsi said and grasped Medakih by the throat.

‘Oh, Tsa-apifor,’ Medakih cried out, ‘I cannot say it while facing you! Let me hide my face at your royal feet!’

Asobo-Ntsi flung him away and he shrank as he fell. In his heart he already knew everything, but it was as if some hope about a contrary report hung in the air, to be pronounced by the guard’s lips.

‘Now tell me, or I go for the answer myself!’ Asobo-Ntsi said, hovering over the miserable figure.

Medakih fell at Asobo-Ntsi’s feet with a stubborn will gone wild, and even then still shielded his face with his hands.

‘Oh, my lord, how I wish I were not the one to deliver this message! How I curse the day your goodness saved me into your service! But Nkumgeb has been made the ruler of his people!’

Asobo-Ntsi looked distraught, suddenly withdrawn into himself. When he talked, it was the echo of the oracle, wondering. ‘Do I hear the broken sounds of something like Kwi’for?’

Dampoulou bowed slightly and cupped his hands.

‘The Gods forbid that we should jest with Asobo-Ntsi!’ he said, ‘their own Kwi’for was announcing the news to Nnkaal!’

Silence fell in the narrow corridor with its mud arches and cobwebs that glistened against the sickly light. Cho-Muluh was like a beaten leaf in the wind, and gapped at the spectacle open-mouthed. Medakih slowly rose to his feet.

‘We were with Tad-tipong and he sent us to inform your highness.’ He swallowed hard, and looked around shaken; ‘they even said you had never been Tsa-apifor, and that ... that you ... usurped the throne!’

But Asobo-Ntsi was no longer listening. He suddenly looked weary and old. His forehead had gathered into a furrowed mask that was unaware of its present environment. Then he walked away, just a few steps almost staggering, as if he were losing his strength.

‘O, you Gods of Nyen!’ he cried out in desperation, ‘what cricket tickle my ear in the dead of night and make me to laugh in my sorrows?’ He was addressing an unseen presence, his body knotting up like toum-kon about to stretch out in a snap. ‘What clouds seek to

blind me, what storm, when Nyen seeks after its happiness? What is happening to me? Oh, Asobo-Ntsi, poor thing that thought his fists were strong, and his feet firm in the mud of his struggles! Where are the friends that crowded me with praise and encouragement, where are they?’

Then someone coughed, but it was like a sob, gagged in the throat by emotion. Asobo-Ntsi stopped at the same time, then aware of his three companions. Then his strength came back in a cold gush that made the three onlookers to cringe away instinctively.

‘But no! I say no!’ Asobo-Ntsi was stabbing the night air with his words, challenging. ‘It can never be! Not in this land, and while I still breathe! I will rather die and be tumbled down the Cliff of Death too than hear that accursed sound again in my land!’ For was he not the custodian of Nyen and of everything that was in it? ‘Let he who doubts come and tell me so!’

Then unexpectedly he faltered again, his voice trembled in a plea, self-piteously.

‘What has Asobo-Ntsi not done for Nkumgeb? I have never deprived him of his share of royal booty. And it was not my fault that the throne did not favour him. The elders simply followed the pattern of the past, even though the father of his father had seen the sun before mine. Why should he now decide to take his revenge on me and challenge my word in the middle of the night? Have I not named him my Nkumgeb and given him authority over his family? But to have his own Kwi?for when my buttocks are still on the royal stool, never!’

He swung round as hurried footsteps were again heard in the yard. It was Tad-tipong ruffled from head to foot with bits of dry grass stuck in his thick hair and dust hanging from his eyebrows. It was evident that he had pursued a path parallel to that of the rebels, and consequently he had to break through bushes.

‘Where is Nkumgeb now?’ Asobo-Ntsi said ignoring the man’s greeting posture, ‘what has he said and decided upon?’

‘He ... he was not present, ‘Tsa-apifor,’ Tad-tipong breathed with difficulty, a hand clasping his chest; ‘he is still ill but they said he cannot refuse.’ He wiped away the sweat from his face with an arced thumb, and the black trickle ran down his arm and dropped off at the elbow. ‘They also said, Mbe-e, that they must now have their boundaries marked out because they have been cheated of what is

theirs for too long. They have asked Nnkaa to assemble tomorrow at sunrise when Nkumgeb's Council of Elders would be announced.'

'Very well then,' Asobo-Ntsi said in a decisive voice, released from his reluctance to act in accordance with the moment. His surroundings were reeling and it looked as if things must crash in a confrontation that will either heal or mar everything forever. 'They should be prepared to fight back when I strike! Then they will know what it means to sound their own death-call like the stupid cricket from its hideout, at night. My land still belongs to me and anyone who wishes to leave like Teneng had done long ago must move very far off. Ala'teneng belongs to him today and he is free to do whatever he likes to do with it. But it would not happen when ingrates dare me within my own land!' His eloquence had returned and with it the mastered confidence that steered him through alien winds like a spirit. And he loved it, such fraught atmospheres when uncertainty was the mark of manhood for him, exposing his claws.

He threw a look of intimidation at Cho-Muluh who recoiled visibly, now wide-eyed and hoping that no errand would crop up against his wishes.

'Go to your father,' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'and ask him to assemble all my loyal Notables immediately. Tell him I hate to wait!' The last words were barked out of his lips like claptrap and Cho-Muluh dashed out like a game that has narrowly missed becoming a victim of the device.

Then Asobo-Ntsi turned to Medakih, as if someone must be victimised by his trap.

'And you,' he said, 'go back to them and let them know that if Nkumgeb must proclaim his own Kwi'for he must do so, like his brother did before, very far away from Nyen. And that he must leave this very night!'

Medakih looked beaten, 'My lord, how can I bear such a heavy message? I cannot walk on Ndindoh's staff.'

'You must now, and you must bear the message the way I bore yours. Go now or else you will have to join them!' It was another clap that ejected Medakih from the confined corridor snapping to, after him.

'And you two come with me,' Asobo-Ntsi said to Tad-tipong and Dampoulou. He rushed off as he spoke, and the others had to scunter after him into a side-door that led to the outer palace grounds

in the direction of the shrine that harboured the hearts of Asobo-Ntsi's predecessors.

Chapter Thirteen

Awapie, father of all mischief, had prophesied doom in his tears but no one remembered it now. His humiliation was a bitter seed that was to tear Nyen apart. He had placed his traps across every path and waited for the wailing that was to come at noon as they feasted their ruin.

It was perhaps a great irony that the new developments in Nnkaa were to be tested almost immediately, in a way which nobody ever anticipated. No sooner did Kwi'for do its maiden trip through the Nnkaa territory, than it was again summoned to go out a second time, to inform the people to get ready to move even before sunrise, to a new location that was still to be specified. No one doubted the ruthlessness of Asobo-Ntsi when confronted with a challenging adversary, and Nnkaa did not want to initiate the newly found way of life with bloodshed. If anything the leaders were unanimous on avoiding a direct confrontation with Asobo-Ntsi until they could not do otherwise. The people were to carry along just the basic needs, and their first tentative stop was to be the Atsoup-Ndan plain on the column of hills stretching out toward Mengoua.

It was sad that the anticipated proclamation ceremony had to be postponed. But the men, even the extremists amongst them, knew that the expected joy would be doubled when in the safety of their own land they could pause in a moment of manhood and give themselves a name.

About fifty of the strongest men in Nnkaa were sent ahead to peg the new settlement of Atsoup-Ndan. They were to make sure that by sunset there was shelter for the women and children of Nnkaa. The heaviness of their hearts made the men more than determined to meet the challenge. Had they not stood up against even more intimidating circumstances and when despair was about to overcome them, had a sudden cry of manhood not saved the day? They promised Awa-nkaa that there will be shelter for every woman and child of Nnkaa by nightfall, and set out in the grey dusk that was already spreading across the Atoualon slope.

Each of them carried a big bundle of bamboos donated by the men of Nnkaa who, like every man in Nyen, had the habit of preserving bamboos in their compounds for necessary repairs on the fence that enclosed the compound or the pigsty. A few of the stronger men added a few freshly cut stems dripping their thick slime. This was to provide the cord for roping the conical huts although they could very easily find raffia bushes in the Atsoup-Ndan neighbourhood.

As the sun rose, the huts began to sprout on the plain like mushroom in the rainy season. And with each completed hut a cry of victory rose from the throats of the singing men, joyous to be the ones to peg out the foundation for the new Nnkaa. They were celebrating, each in his own heart, the collective strive which they were fathoming for Nnkaa. The men worked in little groups and teams, some splitting the bamboos into manageable slices, others preparing the cords, while the younger ones were charged with the responsibility of felling trees and extracting sizeable poles from the branches. The pressure of work imposed itself on them, their muscles responded to the new intimate call. Even neighbours who had hardly spoken to each other because of a boundary dispute suddenly embraced each other in speech; they talked and laughed, finding themselves in a new dream, and chatting as their fingers trailed the cyclic rails. The huts trembled under the collective pressure, taking shape, the men made them to tremble, responding to the new throb in their veins, and they laughed, and chewed kola, watching the huts suddenly take shape from the jumble of poles sharpened and pined into the ground and bowed inward toward the centre pole.

Before the sun was overhead the first group of Nnkaa women and children guarded by some men, came into the new settlement, a rowdy bunch that saw no danger in the vulnerable environment. They shouted their joy to the men, praising them with pet names. It was the Nnkaa dawn they had long been waiting for, prophesied by their ancestors, and why should they be shy in their joy, treading the raw environment, why? They had come with some food for the men they said, offering whatever was handy that could not really impair work. Then the workers talked with full mouths and their voices were stuffed and muffled as their fingers still trembled along the rails, making the shape of the hut to grow from desperate fingers, now talking in fits.

After the initial excitement the women quickly integrated themselves into the pattern of work. They transported the poles from the valley up to the plain, cut grass for the roofing, while a few daring ones also roped the rails. It was the Fon's work, their new Fon, and no one would be exempted from performing a task.

They talked in low tones, engrossed in work, as new groups arrived, raised their voices in praise and then fitted into the task at hand without directives. They understood so much without words, and hoped to by-pass the pains of labour, to await only the new birth in jubilation.

The children were also infected by the rhythm of work; they skipped in their excitement tethering the goats and pigs they had dragged along. Then it was their task to weed the interior of the huts, level the floor and stamp it into solid surface. No one cared about a sleeping place; they will sit up all night telling stories about the inhuman journey which they inherited and were reenacting, rubbing palm oil into his sores and chewing leaves along the way. It was the journey they too were making, a continuation of it, and would only relax when the land was truly theirs, with no molestations to threaten them. They were hemmed in and only called out in low tones for a bamboo or rope, holding the cord between their teeth to position the rail and then hedge it in with a raised foot before pulling with a force that made the whole hut to tremble so.

Still time was running out. Then the men worked furiously, encouraged by the ever increasing throng of people pouring into the new settlement. Already plans were being made for the first night 'abroad' and nobody disputed these. The women were to sleep together with their babies, and the children in separate huts also clustered together, waiting for another dawn of activity. Apart from the old men, who were to be provided lodging, the rest of the men were to spend the night outside, keeping up some form of guard. One never can say with Asobo-Ntsi, they cautioned, when the devil took possession of him and made him to act like a mad man.

So they worked like people who had never known idleness, and rarely paused for the basket of snacks that was passed round from time to time. The hard slices of boiled and sun-baked potatoes lulled them away from hunger as they lingered on, chewing, and forgetting the effort of work.

By nightfall they had erected enough huts to contain all the

women and their children together with a few of the very old men. Some of the men had been dispatched to fetch logs of wood and soon a huge campfire illuminated the precincts of the settlement. The excitement was great; the children danced round the men who were gathered around the fire like initiates at a night ritual. Little firesides were made and the women prepared whatever they could find for the evening meal.

But the frantic activity of the day was taking its toll on them. They had been served with warm wine and under its effect, soon after the meal, the women began to yawn, rubbing their eyes and then would sneak into the huts as if to fetch something and would not come out again. Some of the men began talking in a drawly manner and stretching out to fend off sleep. By midnight when Tita arrived the settlement with 'kola' from Awa-nkaa, only a few men were still up, talking and drinking.

Tita greeted them in the royal name of Awa-nkaa, and went on to talk at length of how Nnkaa will live to remember this day and the courage of the men and women, even children, to be free from tyranny. Awa-nkaa had received news of their progress, Tita said, and would be with them by the time the sun stood on their heads the following day. By then not even a lame dog belonging to Nnkaa would be left behind in Nyen.

And so the night wore on, on them; they were as confident as ever of the prospects of their new settlement and knew that under the fatherly leadership of Awa-nkaa their night of horror was over.

Asobo-Ntsi had spent most of the day in consultation and anticipation. His notables had all arrived with the exception of Ama'a. No one doubted the reasons for his absence, and it was clear too that the Nnkaa decision was no longer provisional; they had taken the bold step and wrenched the hoe handle apart. What then was expected of Asobo-Ntsi, the Fon said, almost to himself, meditatively communing with the gathered notables, now that one half of the handle dangled in his hand? Was he to fold his arms and watch Awa-nkaa take his people away and expose him, Asobo-Ntsi, to the ridicule of other Fons, or simply wield the broken implement into the weapon of his wounded heart?

He had accordingly summoned his notables to inform them of his intentions, let it never be said that Asobo-Ntsi acted alone. He was to order Tongari to capture all the leaders of the rebellion and bring them to the palace. That way he would suffer them into submission, and order brought back to the land. A few notables suggested moderate alternatives, such that will not compromise the benevolence of royalty, but Asobo-Ntsi would not hear of it.

'I have another proposal, Tsa-apifor,' it was Ndiyzé; 'Tongari should first go to Nnkaa and frighten them back into their houses.' Ndiyzé was as soft-spoken as ever. Listening to him no one will imagine that there was a crisis in Nyen. At such moments, and talking the way he did, Asobo-Ntsi hated him because, in the end, he was certain to sway everyone's opinion to his side. 'Our people say a house can never be allowed to catch fire and burn to the ground while there is still an elder in it,' he concluded and many heads nodded in agreement. Asobo-Ntsi was broken; he tried to counter the apparent consensus, emphasising his supremacy at critical moments like this, but his notables would not budge. And without telling him so they were threatening him, implying that they too controlled spheres of influence like Awa-nkaa, and should be listened to! Asobo-Ntsi felt his intestines cringe in anger that could not be voiced. So he conceded, soliciting a compromise that annulled his very existence, for what was his use again, if he had to be dictated to?

Tongari was to move into Nnkaa with all the might of intimidation, casting awe all over the place and brandishing the guns from Nwuoupang. These had never been used ever since they were used to cut down Tipah warriors across the Ngamncho hill; now they could not even be taken even to the royal hunt for fear it would contaminate the booty, apart from the fact that the quantity of gunpowder given Asobo-Ntsi was limited. After the war with Tipah Nwuoupang had recalled all but ten of the firearms, blaming himself in a report to the Commissioner in Buea for having unknowingly ignited uncivilised instincts that had lain fallow for decades, even centuries.

Then the notables left, to prepare themselves and their people in case of any eventuality. Nyen was carrying a child whose laps she could not open and so could not say its sex. Anything was possible, and the notables all agreed to stand behind Asobo-Ntsi and bring Nnkaa to order in a brotherly manner.

Chapter Fourteen

I, the voice, the one and only voice ... shudders of Time, and we only twigs, conjugated in the past tense with future suffixes? The old man, witness and victim and custodian: and he, next in relay, blurred by visions and submerging vision?

Suddenly the sky turned red
and wailed into the corners of earth, bleeding,
the voice being silenced, the silenced given voice.
Horror stood on the horizon
poised on a myth
against the imaginations of manhood,
and no one could resist the summons
as steel glittered against the rays cutting across the hillcrest.
And the old man, a stiff lump of memory,
could only breathe in whispers,
witness and victim,
kin against kin,
and the sun wept...

The sun was already inclining toward Mbekien and Asobo-Ntsi was a heap on his stool in his private chambers. He had listened to the throbbing of his heart suddenly become gong-beats from his palace gate, alerting the people of things never dreamt of in Nyen. He shuddered convulsively in the grip of his own thoughts, smoking a smaller pipe and spitting unconsciously into the corner. After the departure of his notables, Tongari with a few of Asobo-Ntsi's fighters had begun prowling through Nnkaa, and as predicted every movement ceased. The people were quickly advised and they heeded to it. But they soon devised a new route, sneaking out of their houses and descending the slope into the valley to join the others in the long march out of the village.

Tad-tipong was the first to notice the fugitives, and screamed for them to stop and turn back or else face the wrath of Asobo-Ntsi.

They were only going to the farm, the women pleaded, to see if they could bring home something to eat. But they were carrying no baskets, and why go to the farm with babies? Some of the other guards had gathered around by now, and some of the women began to tremble. Then one of them broke down in confession; it was not of their own accord, she wept, how could they disobey Asobo-Ntsi?

Dampoulou was immediately dispatched to inform Asobo-Ntsi of the new developments, and to know from him what Tongari was to do. Asobo-Ntsi listened to Dampoulou, his upper lip trembling with controlled rage.

‘Go back now,’ Asobo-Ntsi said when Dampoulou was through, ‘and inform Nkumngheb that Atsoup-Ndan is not far enough! Tell him that my land extends right to Menguoua, and he must move before the sun goes to sleep!’

He had again relapsed into the brooding mood after Dampoulou’s hasty departure. Listening to his fading footsteps and then to the regular rhythm of palace activities as if all was normal in the land, Asobo-Ntsi had to struggle hard to subdue his aggressive instinct. He gathered his thoughts with an effort, to concentrate on discretion, and forestall what blood was beating for. He smoked and thought, and then wondered at times without really knowing exactly why.

Another knock came on the door and had to be repeated, slightly louder before Asobo-Ntsi could look up, dragging his mind from its far off wanderings. Without waiting for a response the door opened and Mafor came in, a stern look distorting her face. She was carrying a bowl in her hands with a wooden cover.

‘Why are you refusing food?’ she said, placing the bowl on a stool.

‘I am eating, mother,’ Asobo-Ntsi said faintly. His mind was still abroad, gathering possibilities.

‘Eating indeed!’ Mafor snickered; ‘since when did kolanuts and tobacco replace food? I have brought you some mbang and will see you later.’ She was authoritative, talking with the authority she was born to bear when he, Asobo-Ntsi, became powerless, as now, inactive. She was not seeking his opinion and he knew better than to resist. She stormed out of the room again and he listened to her strident voice, cold with authority.

‘Go in now,’ she commanded whoever it was, ‘and if he

refuses again you come and inform me!’

The door opened with a timid drag and Wopong came in almost stealthily. It was clear that Mafor had prevailed on her to take the daring step and there was a tremor in her voice as she talked.

‘My lord,’ she said, ‘you cannot starve yourself in this manner!’ Asobo-Ntsi could hear the undisguised voice of Mafor behind the young queen’s, putting words into her mouth and what tone to adopt. He almost laughed. ‘Two days now without tasting even a morsel from your queens! So they have sent me, my lord, to come and plead with you to eat and then to stay with you.’ She was relieved to be through and Asobo-Ntsi saw her face relax again.

‘Wopong,’ Asobo-Ntsi said, his voice too affected by the feminine sentiments, ‘what food do I need again, when Nkumngheb is feeding me like my own mother? Do not trouble yourself, woman, and tell the others. I do not know what hunger is, anymore.’

There was a sudden rush of feet outside followed by a scuffle. Asobo-Ntsi listened; whoever it was, did not wish to be noisy. Wopong was tense and confused.

‘I say no!’ Mafor’s voice rang out with desperation and at the same time Medakih rushed in and was momentarily taken aback by the presence of the young queen. He was making meaning out of Mafor’s protestation, Asobo-Ntsi knew, seeing the two of them in enclosed intimacy, and if only Mafor had been right!

‘What is it, Meda?’ He sounded strangely intimate.

‘They are already planting their fig tree, Tsa-apifor, on the banks of Atsoup-Ndan!’ He laboured in breathing, breaking the news.

Almost immediately Asobo-Ntsi regained his authority and looked at Wopong with dark, unseeing eyes. The woman looked at her wrung hands and at the bowl on the stool and then into the dismissing eyes of Asobo-Ntsi, once more casting her off.

‘Do you think I will sit here feeding myself while Nkumngheb enthrones himself in my land?’ He was already on his feet, stamping and cursing under his breath. ‘No, woman,’ he said as Wopong made weak gestures of appeal with her raised hands, ‘I will never eat while Nkumngheb install himself over my people.’ Then he turned to Medakih, blood in his eyes, ‘Go out now and beat the war gong, go!’

Medakih stared at him, together with Wopong, perplexed. This was an unexpected twist, and no one will be happy to take part

in it. How could a brotherly fight transform so suddenly into a call for clubs?

‘Are you deaf?’ Asobo-Ntsi barked. ‘Beat the gong, I say!’

Medakih and Wopong scampered out in fright, blocking the doorway in their confusion. Even as they rushed out they could hear the heavy breathing of Asobo-Ntsi, forced through his blared nostrils. He was like an animal, trapped, and seeking for a space to break out.

Medakih confronted questioning looks from the other guards. He simply indicated to the gong and nodded them along. He was too baffled for speech and slopped on toward the shaded wall from which the gong was suspended by thick cords at both ends. It was now the turn of the others to stare, transfixed by the thought of impending bloodshed, of kin against kin. But Medakih was waiting and they knew only too well that Asobo-Ntsi would soon be charging out to know why his instructions have not been executed. With reluctant hands they assisted Medakih and lowered the huge wooden trunk, hollowed from two rectangular spots that were linked by a thin scar-like cut. The stool that dangled by the raised gong was also lowered. Tad-tipong knew it was his turn to manipulate the medium and send across the painful message. He adjusted himself, took a deep breath and then let go of himself, abandoning his energy in the hysteria of rattling out the foreboding message in rolling and then halting, disjointed notes. He paused from time to time in dramatic suspension, and shook his head in mournful jerks to the dismal rhythm. If he must, then he must, he told himself, resuming the summons.

Asobo-Ntsi danced into his war gear at the first sound of the gong. He was so anxious he seemed to be dancing, as he got dressed. He had already sorted everything out in his heart for, who knows, it may be a long challenge; he was condemned to sit somewhere around the battle ground and await reports about the progress. He had to guard against the cold especially at night and in the mornings when the dew made the mandere tune to drawl out with a stifled blare.

Presently he slipped into the adjoining room where his personal shrine was located. He kneeled by the half-buried clay pot and began his supplication, breathing with an effort, laboured, almost panting.

‘You, my fathers of happier days,’ he began, ‘whose spirits are

here-contained, I, Asobo-Ntsi implore you! You who pointed out the path for Tenghehfeng to tread and for us thereafter: what chameleon now creeps into our house, dragging along humiliation onto our roof? Did I not deserve the throne as Nnkaa now says? It is from you, Awa-nkaa that I seek to know. 'Tell me, when two brothers fought over a log of wood and in anger I threw my brother's axe into Qwang because he challenged my manhood, did you not comfort me with the promise of great things from the royal barn? What more comfort then could the defeated expect than your spittle in my palms, from your death-bed, just as my father had desired when you were called upon to guard the throne? Did I not make peace with my brother as you had urged, and named him Nkumgeb? But today he removes my cap in public and challenges me to a wrestling contest on the hills. O, watchful fathers who never blink in protective vigilance, if I am wrong, strike me down in my own pride. If not lead me across the muddy river for I must reach the other bank, or perish in the attempt.'

Then he rose slowly to his feet, regaining stability as the war gong picked up a new momentum, vibrating through his veins. Asobo-Ntsi smiled to himself, abstractly despondent, a blank smile like that of a mask, without eyelids. Life was coming back into his veins, he felt it, and was happy in a wooden way, without feeling. Then he hopped to the jaggng rhythm and emerged into the outer courtyard. A group of stiff-looking men was already assembled, in scattered readiness for combat. Even then some were still arriving, alert with anxiety, brandishing assorted weapons like spears, bows and arrows, machetes, while a few had dane guns crudely forged by Ntarlam. Asobo-Ntsi knew he could not turn back now, stop the people and say 'it is just child's play,' no, he could not. A loud trumpet sound heralded his emergence into the yard and a sharp bellicose cry rose from the throats of the men, scaring. They were suddenly stiff with intent, and Asobo-Ntsi knew he could not stop now.

'Nyen-Mechop,' he greeted, desperation gripping his voice, 'the courageous sounds of death summon you all. But it is also the cry of a woman at childbirth! It is Awa-nkaa, bidding you here, through me. Have we not always said that the people of Nyen fight against each other with their elbows? Have we not always said too that such fights take place beyond the main compound fence, away

from the fragile sights of children? But today, my people, we must fight with our fists and use the things we used against Tipah and Mefimé, if we must.'

He paused as his lead fighters trooped into the yard in assorted war attire. It was clear even to the ordinary eye that they had blended themselves within the short interval between the first gong sounds and their arrival, and now walked in a realm that was not meant for humans. They held life and death in the same hand, and saw them as one, forging ahead. Asobo-Ntsi allowed them to fit themselves accordingly into the assembly, and then addressed their leader.

'Ntarlam, you alone know my needs in distress; rally our people and lead them to the hills above Atsoup-Ndan: you shall be rewarded when this is all over and when tomorrow Asobo-Ntsi again smiles. Spill no blood if you must not, and send them away if you cannot bring them back. Sa'amontoh will keep me informed of your every action.'

He stopped; it was not the moment for long speeches, when people hungered for a royal feather. As he turned to go back into the palace the eerie sounds of mandéré filled the air and he could feel the solemn air of excitement descending on the people.

Awa-nkaa groaned aloud when he heard the war gong from the palace. He knew what that meant. But he was shocked that Asobo-Ntsi was calling for war, when Nnkaa had opted for peace by leaving. He had to make conditional plans immediately, side-step Asobo-Ntsi's blunt blow aimed at his people. He knew that his men were already thinking ahead of his arrival but once more, the hilarious ceremony of his arrival had to be deferred.

He looked at the group of dark men gathered in his ntang with heavy faces, speechless in their knowledge of heavier things to come. Their brows gathered like hoods of doom, for they knew Asobo-Ntsi and knew the things that he loved to do with vindictive ecstasy even against himself. Violence was the context for the ultimate manifestation of his spirit, licking his lips at such moments in biting gestures of satisfaction. Violence pushed him forward, and he laughed like a charging mask, a streak of contentment on his face,

covering the territory of his passion. He was out against Nnkaa and would not stop until they were crushed under his fury, subjected once more. But Nnkaa had resolved not to be subjugated anymore, and thence to know Asobo-Ntsi from a distance like a thing that was, but had passed away, and should be forgotten with sleep. So the elders of Nnkaa gathered themselves up, the remnants of a dream that should not die, and fought against the portending sounds of Asobo-Ntsi, cutting across their shaky strides. They knew Asobo-Ntsi would not attack them at night, he was a proud man and would need daylight to feed his vengeance against Nnkaa, and within that time Nnkaa too would be ready for him.

The group of Nnkaa men gathered at the new settlement also listened to the rumbling sounds. The valleys had carried the waves and echoed them through their narrow woodiness, and now the resonance caught the men unawares. They looked at each other with little pinched-in eyes, and felt the fear that stood in every heart. Then a whisper began to run through them; they were happy the women and children were asleep, and should be dreaming of better things in their new land. But the men knew too that dawn would no longer bring the expected sunshine; they had to make plans and act even before Awa-nkaa reached the settlement, as expected, that midnight.

Evening had finally descended on the palace and with it the silence of fear and uncertainty, after the gong beats. The people had hurried into their homes like frightened chicks scattering into the undergrowth following a hawk-sweep over the homestead. Silence sealed every lip, but their hearts hammered out the familiar rhythm and they were scared by the sudden awareness of kin blood cuddling on their spear tip with the awful cry that would never cease.

But no one could prevail over Asobo-Ntsi in his moment of blind determination; he seemed to be stumbling ahead of everyone, even himself, with a plan that could not be altered. His notables had failed to alter his plans, and consequently resigned, they sat in the inner courtyard listening to the certain echoes of death in their chests,

as Asobo-Ntsi stumbled into his chambers, in and out. His pipe was his only companion and not even Cho-Muluh was welcome. He would smoke and think and grow stiff with instinctive confidence, absorbing fear with every smoke puffed out of his bearded jaws. It was a rare moment of relish when his eyes glittered with unknown certainty, and no one could dare stop him.

The door creaked open without a knock and Mecham stepped into the room and contemplated the Fon's back for sometime before coughing, to distract him. Asobo-Ntsi did not turn, only smoke spiralled around his head. Mecham coughed again.

'What do you want?' Asobo-Ntsi said without turning.

'Tsa-apifor!' Mecham greeted, 'I must intrude on your privacy.'

'Ah, Mecham, come in' Asobo-Ntsi said, suddenly jovial, 'the Fon has never enjoyed a private life and today just any slave can compare his teeth with those of Asobo-Ntsi's.'

Mecham cleared his throat without cause, he wanted to be in a similarly genial mood, happy that his task was going to be easier than the other notables had anticipated.

'And even then,' he said, 'Asobo-Ntsi remains Asobo-Ntsi. The lion can never bleat like a goat, my lord.'

Asobo-Ntsi laughed dryly. It was clear that he was struggling to be himself against a surge of emotions.

'So what does Mecham bring an unhappy man like Asobo-Ntsi?' He knocked out his pipe and pretended not to see the sharp look of surprise on Mecham's face, taken aback. So Asobo-Ntsi expected some suggestions from his notables, after all? And to think of the way the man left them, without a word, adamant. Mecham rubbed his palms together, smiling through his tobacco-stained teeth.

'None, 'Tsa-apifor,' he said, 'none for now.' Then he cleared his throat again, a bit anxious. 'But we were thinking Mbe-e, that 'Tsa-apifor should send Ndiyzé with a fig leaf to Nkumngeb.'

'No, Mecham, even if that is what all of my notables agree on.' Asobo-Ntsi's voice was already becoming taut and he was again aloof in his pride. 'Asobo-Ntsi never carries 'yes' and 'no' in the same mouth. When a man cracks jokes with a child for too long he will one day invite you to accompany him to the stream. The time for talking was before Nkumngeb was made leader.'

So it was not going to be easy, after all, Mecham thought,

unconsciously shaking his head. The others had counted on his aggressive tongue, but now he realised that even the most eloquent tongue shrinks to its root once the object to be confronted is Asobo-Ntsi.

‘But Nkumgeb was never consulted, my lord,’ he ventured again, shifting uncomfortably on his stool; ‘and he could not refuse the offer without making his people angry.’

‘No man throws away a piece of meat because of the bone, Mecham,’ Asobo-Ntsi said. ‘The people of Nnkaa offered Nkumgeb what he desired all along but he was a coward to acknowledge it.’

That was true, Mecham could not deny such ironic truth. But then everybody desired the throne, only that fear would not allow them confess the truth. It was a piece of meat that very few people would step forward and openly declare that they had the teeth to chew.

Mecham knew it was futile to continue, and even more dangerous to attempt coaxing Asobo-Ntsi. As Ndesoh had suggested, the Fon was now burning coal that no palm could contain.

‘Stop blowing ash without live coals, Mecham,’ was all he said in resignation, dismissing; ‘you will only end up having red eyes for nothing.’

The first cocks were crowing when Mecham returned to his peers. He suddenly realised that he did not know what to tell them; there had been no tangible conclusion between him and the Fon, and how could a man of his verbal stature simply tell the others that Asobo-Ntsi had said ‘No’ even to him?

He sat down and gathered the skirts of his ntum into his thighs and in turn stared at the others blankly. Then he shook his head and they understood. It was as they had feared, and knew what to expect from the silent sounds of subdued activity going on in the palace. Shadows stalked the doorways and often, someone would pause at the entrance and regard them with darkly glittering eyes before disappearing into the night. They knew that Asobo-Ntsi had set them to work and they were preparing for war. It was his right too to declare war, and merely inform them for the necessary rites and assistance. For while they cautioned against Asobo-Ntsi’s rash action, none of them could accept the fact that the throne was challenged by the Nnkaa Kwi’for, while there was still light in the

palace.

The four muscular men who carried Nkumgeb paused at the top of the hill and gently lowered the strapped carriage to the ground. They had walked for some distance after they had sneaked out of Sware'nka, knowing that Asobo-Ntsi's spies were all over the place to monitor their least action. They had made their way in darkness at a very slow pace because of Nkumgeb, and stepped further into the bushes whenever they heard voices. When they were beyond the settlements they moved into the footpaths with two of the carriers in front and the other two behind. The conversation between Nkumgeb and the other three elders who accompanied him was sparing and necessary only to lessen the burden of the trip.

When they approached the first hill they fitted the carriage on a level spot and cushioned it with dry plantain leaves. The ascent was slow and no one talked. Their breathing soon became laborious, wheezy and puffy. They even groaned from time to time, and pinned their toes into the earth to gauge themselves and then push on ahead. They could not complain, proud as they were, to be carrying Nnkaa on their own very shoulders, into a new land. They were the few founders of a dream and knew that generations after them shall sing their names. Behind them lay the vast expanse of night-covered dread against which every muscle stood out, repudiating; and ahead, even as they groaned, their toes were itchy for the new earth, anticipating the tearful cries of joy. Dawn was already heralding their effort and their sight grew accustomed to the changing skies below, which they craved for home. They held the dream on their shoulders, between them, and propelled themselves forward, forgetting the seasons of pain and regrets that bred humiliation on broken brows. All that mattered now was dawn proclaiming truth after which their toes trod, and they could hear the voices of generations to come in fairy narratives astride the hearths of Nnkaa.

The group was surprised to see a crowd of men and women with a few children gathered on the settlement, in expectation of their arrival. They had carved out a small arena in the middle of the huts. A suppressed cry of joy rose among the women, and they surged forward in silent welcome, their joy suppressed by the uncertainty of

what was to come. But their voices could not be mute for long; the sounds rose from their throats and they stretched out their souls, straining to be heard in silent ululation, dancing to the mystery of the new seed. They were proud, and rose above themselves, cooing to the rhythm of their feet, blistered by generations of patient wait. It was their day, the dawn of Woman, emerging like a shoot and trembling from their bosoms like a birth cry. They were assured, even in uncertainty, their waists rolled to the truth of the fact, and the men smiled in silent acknowledgement, allowing the women to bless Nkumgeb. He was theirs for the moment, they were free to charm him with the spell of their mystery at parturition, sprinkled at his royal feet. Heavy-dusted feet pattered the dewy earth and waists rolled to the rhythm of mystery, the mystery of the beginning, cutting the umbilical cord to be buried under a skinny plantain shoot and watered with the piss of many, many seasons. The wandering child shall find it on a day of misery, tracing the pattern of the sky from tracks of the past, weak and forlorn.

The men, looking on, and charmed, could not mistake the voice rising from forgotten memory, rekindling their loins and seeding the expanse of vast uninhabited land, then deaf to human voice. They scratched their heads in sudden recognition, the women had made them remember what could never be forgotten, under the hollow sky of dawn. They felt strong suddenly, and heard the voice again creeping back into their veins with the slow assurance of initiation.

The children were scared at the beginning; they carried blank, scary looks in their unused eyes, wondering. So much was precipitated already, they had been hastened into old age before they could open their eyes and make them familiar to the vacant landscape. Only yesterday they knew where they belonged, or thought they did, and had been enticed by the ripe fruits dripping juice all over the homestead. Then they had gone to sleep to wake up the following day in a blank moment of hastened existence. The fruits were gone but their mothers' lips held a promise, a lullaby fermented over the seasons into a mystery of rebirth and conjured into new huts planted on hills without frontiers. All they could see and understand were the skies inclining in the distance to touch the hills that were rising, on their part, for embrace. But their faces were changing; age was already growing into the patterns of childhood and

beckoning them to reason and to responsibility, to understand without questioning. So they forgot the fruits and the juices, and hushed from nagging nuisance, to submit only to the blank moment confronting them now, in a virgin arena with no trails to follow...

The women hurriedly gathered the children again and scattered the ash from the hearth and searched, once more, for the narrow tracks trailing the hills into the wooded valleys, already familiar to a nomadic lifestyle. The lullaby was sustained, who could refrain from the harmony whispered from confused mouths, gathering destitution into unknown ways?

Pattering footfalls opened up new paths, and left a trail for the homestead dog to follow, from the urine of pressured maternity.

And manhood stood on the horizon in a strained assertion of itself, trumpeting the crimson challenge for combat against itself. Horses neighed and hoofed dust into blinking eyes seeking refuge; there was no hiding place remote enough from the blood-drawing claws of Tongari, enraged by the bloom of manhood against the sparkling horizon. Who rules the distances in daring estimation of the lion's own roar, echoing from the horizon as testimony to stubborn consciences, who?

By-ways were entrapped and the resonance of awe lurched in the uncertainty of captivity, feeding Tongari in the lead with nuptial energy. The songs of the past were recollected in the moment of waste and filtered into dirges, as feet tangled each other, along the narrow track of captivity. And then flames rippled through the dreamed-of kingdom of a night, lusty against the thatch and bamboo. Groans and curses, defying submission; spewed smoke from dying cinders with smell of roasted flesh: of pork and beef and chicken. The rage had been complete against everything, into submission, a despondent booty that needed no justification. It was a spree of the Gods themselves, sanctioned drunkenness in the laps of woe and misery, and following the course of the sun beyond the distance of the squinted eyesight.

For, at last, the sun had laughed itself into a weak forsaken spectre, about to sink again over the horizon, witness to the smarting of blood against blood. Things were once more as of old, subdued.

The royal trumpet acknowledged its supremacy against itself, already drunk with the knowledge of its strength. It listened to the pattern of tears, and followed the subdued calls, sobered by the spilled blood of man and animal.

Asobo-Ntsi knew what to expect even before the shouts broke over the last hill into his observatory slope some distance above the palace, in the hilarious confusion of those whose task had been laid to rest. They were relieved, returning, having been burdened against themselves even if they could not show this in front of Asobo-Ntsi.

And the return to the palace was a triumph of glory, expended in extravagance ahead of the harbingers, to await them in proper royalty.

Women and children sneaked out of their houses and rubbed initial sleep out of the eyes. They were still not sure, and had to be cautious, in case it was instead Nnkaa coming for Asobo-Ntsi. It had happened in the days of legends when Nkhefor stood on the tip of his spear to swear immortality. He rode on knowledge of his own immortality over the land, laying it bare in ransom to his rage, dragging away the young beautiful girls and oxen and strong-limbed men as slaves. No one stood in his way, except the conspiracy of night, many seasons after, across a spiked trench when he reached for the habitual harvest from the straddling men crossing the border to Mbvou' to exchange oil for beef. But they had looked on, when ordered by Nkhefor with the mighty heart to stop and pay homage to his immortality, and enraged at their stubbornness, had cried out in a lone stride toward them, swinging his mighty sword at the same time, targeting the heads that should roll at his feet in bloody supplication. But something had snapped under his heavy footfall and the pit had hollowed his further cry, with spikes glinting through his mighty chest. He had howled and groaned, but no one came to his rescue, as his men, seeing the end of their leader, had fled into the forest and the people of Nyen had tossed Nkhefor's head homeward weeping because they knew they were free at last, emerging from legend to initiate the tearless day for many seasons and generations to come.

Those days still echoed in their heart, resurrected from legend, and could very easily come back with their stories, as Nyen

stood up against itself, blind. The women felt this and passed it on to their children, as they watched and listened, hoping and dreading. But the heralds were of Asobo-Ntsi's entourage, and sang his name and the women stepped back into the coffee boughs.

'What news do you bring from Atsoup-Ndan, Sa'amontoh?' Asobo-Ntsi said as soon as the choice of royalty crossed the palace threshold, ignoring the habitual reverence.

'They have been subdued, Tsa-apifor!' Sa'amontoh was still breathing hard from the excitement of the return trip.

'Has Nkumngheb surrendered then?' Asobo-Ntsi's excitement was almost childlike, as if his throne depended on that.

'No, my lord,' Sa'amontoh said with trepidation in his voice, 'they would not surrender, so we simply subdued them. The hills and valleys echoed with the heart-rending blare of Ngwar'e-ntom under the breathe of Atamndvu.' He was again warm and his voice oily in reconstructing what was soon to fall into the pattern of legends, adorned by human lips and sounds. Were they not proud to be carrying the wrath of Asobo-Ntsi, he bragged, as flame leapt from each hut top and they rounded up the rebels and broke their will into submission!

'Is Sa'amontoh saying that they have been captured ...' Ndiyzé began, hesitant because he dreaded what he feared. He had never loved to be a part of legends.

'Killed, of course!' Asobo-Ntsi said in expectancy of what his heart hammered for, in his chest. 'They chose death than to have peace, and why should they only be captured, Ndiyzé?'

But Sa'amontoh was momentarily confused as if he had been caught in his own trap.

'But, Tsa-apifor,' he said, 'nobody has been killed. Tisagli could not drink of her own blood, Mmahshi warned us, and so we only subdued them. And some have fled.'

'It makes no difference, Sa'amontoh!' Asobo-Ntsi said, jubilant in his own legend unfolding before his very eyes. 'That should teach them never to take fire for a playmate. My realm has no boundaries. Where are the captured ones?'

'On their way to the palace, Mbe-e,' Sa'amontoh said, 'I had to come ahead to inform Tsa-apifor.'

'What of Nkumngheb?' Ndiyzé said.

'Captured too, Ndiyzé,' Sa'amontoh said, 'his people

attempted carrying him away, but we intercepted them. But he still refused to remove his cap and bow to you, Tsa-apifor!’

‘It does not matter,’ Asobo-Ntsi said, unable to hide his satisfaction, ‘he could never escape my wrath! Even if he climbed Menguoua, Asobo-Ntsi was sure to bring him down!’ It was his moment and he was proud of it and of himself, looking up with wild unseeing eyes, dazzling. ‘Let my enemies say I was cruel then, but I will not live to see Nyen torn apart by her own hands.’

He paused and turned as Le’kwahri appeared at the door and gently touched the strings of his crude instrument.

‘Aha!’ Asobo-Ntsi exclaimed, ‘our stunted pleasure-giver! You come on time, Le’kwahri ... give us a tune to take away our late sorrows.’

‘O, Tsa-apifor!’ Le’kwahri burst out in a laNtiyng voice, ‘it is not my wish to comfort a child with a dirge. But Mafor has urged me to come and cheer you up.’

‘Then Mafor is still living with our past fears. But she did right for now we must celebrate! Let us have a song, Le’kwahri else you are no more the porcupine that makes its crossing point on rocks!’

‘O, my lord! Who else can it be, if it is not Le’kwahri himself? I, Tsa-apifor, with my path across the rocky surface! Who can trace my path then, and pin me down, where no stick can be planted? Or set a trap that I cannot see, stunted as I am, Tsa-apifor? I take pride in insulting myself because no one dares! I wanted to go to Atsoup-Ndan, Mbe-e, but Mafor will not let me; nothing would have touched me, the greatest pebble-dodger in all Nyen!’ He was excited and balled his diminutive figure from one spot to another, between the Fon and his notables, as if to confirm his utterances. The men laughed, forgetting themselves, and seeing them so entrapped, Le’kwahri became crafty.

‘Tsa-apifor has asked me to sing his song,’ he said, turning to Sa’amontoh, ‘but how can the dog hunt well on an empty stomach? The dog wants only its bone and there will be enough meat for the evening meal!’

His mother had buried eight sons before the last whom she named Le’kwahri and challenged the witches to lay their claws on him. So she named him Le’kwahri, pride of her womb, later recruited to tickle Asobo-Ntsi’s moodiness.

But before Asobo-Ntsi, smiling, could reward him a trumpet sounded at the palace entrance and almost at once the men crowded the door. Le'kwahri was disappointed, and stood away from the sudden excitement with a long face, his lower lip hanging as evidence.

'They are here, 'Tsa-apifor!' Ndiyzé said, 'your warriors and your burden.'

Almost immediately a group of captive were pushed into the room. Their hands were bound and almost all of them were bleeding and dusty.

Asobo-Ntsi approached them. Their heads were suddenly stooped in a stubborn bow and they stood there stiff in their confrontation with adversary. They were opposed to the very presence of the man who had caused them so much humiliation.

'Welcome to the palace again, Nkumngeb,' Asobo-Ntsi said, shaking his head.

Nkumngeb looked up and bitterness lit up his wrinkled eyes into tiny glittering flashes. Hate stood in between the two men like a bottomless valley across which they dared not place a bridge. The others looked on, and understood.

'What have my people done to you?' Nkumngeb said in a fierce whisper.

Asobo-Ntsi stood back and surveyed the older man with squinted eyes.

'What have they not done to me!' His blood was already rising and the feeling of self-pity that had swaddled his face was giving way to the stiffness of brutality. 'Nkumngeb knows that the hand that ties firewood must also lift the bundle onto the head.'

'Leave my people alone!' Nkumngeb hissed, hoarse with determination.

'I gave you your feather,' Asobo-Ntsi was saying, fighting back, lest he be pushed away into the submission of compassion, against himself, 'but you wanted more than your due. No, Nkumngeb, not so with Asobo-Ntsi!'

'My people are innocent!' Nkumngeb said; 'they only wish to have what is theirs, blameless and victimised!'

'So you think I am mad?' Asobo-Ntsi said, looking around. He was aware that the soft words of Nkumngeb were creeping into the veins of his notables, and he looked around, afraid of sudden isolation. He had to fight back with both fists, and not just with his

elbows, to regain his position and following even then.

‘So you call me a mad man to go against my own people?’ he said; ‘No, Nkumngeb, that is not Asobo-Ntsi. But I will tie your firewood at the roots if you want to wrestle with Asobo-Ntsi!’

Then he turned round, snappy in his agitation. He was shaken by the cold rebuff from Nkumngeb and propelled then beyond himself into a space where he saw no blame.

‘I must go to Atisong in the morning,’ he said to no one in particular although his glazed eyes were staring at Sa’amontoh who shifted uncomfortably, ‘and inform Nwuoupang of what has taken place. Medakih should make sure they are all locked up until I return. But let them not die of hunger.’

Then he turned to Ndiyzé with a softer voice.

‘You must all be ready. By cock crow we should be crossing Agha’ngu’s hills.’

And without another word, he stormed out of the room followed by Ndiyzé and Mecham. He was running away from himself in order to find himself, Ndiyzé thought, unable to know what the end will look like.

‘My people are innocent, Asobo-Ntsi!’ Nkumngeb shouted after the retreating figure, ‘and there will never be peace in Nyen until they are given what is theirs!’ He was panting with the effort of utterance, struggling against the restraining hands of the guards, pulling him back. But Nkumngeb knew too what many of them did not know then, that his voice had been planted in their hearts, they had been poisoned by his words and would forever wriggle in the pain of fulfilment with themselves and against themselves when he shall be no more. It was a seed that was to grow and bear fruits on the manure of their consciences in denial, fighting themselves and searching for themselves at the same time. So he was dragged out and into the stony walls that Nwuoupang had taught Asobo-Ntsi how to construct and which served as a sty for the wayward citizen.

Chapter Fifteen

And Memory proclaimed, 'I have been transgressed; I, the changeless repository, I have been violated: but that is still to come, still to come, by those who seek to utter my name with their own shredded tongue, set their breath on my bellows'.

Eerie pauses of the inhuman realm on a withering day...

'I have been transgressed. But my voice repeats the horrors of birth and the horrors of death. And those who muffle me shall stare in death with fixed, gaping mouths. I, transgressed and transgressing, when no remittance soothes my ire, beware!'

The sun poured its weak blinding shafts into the eyes of the travellers and they had to shield their sight from time to time, so as not to stumble off the narrow path. They were walking in a single file with Asobo-Ntsi ahead and followed by his notables. Of course tongare was ahead, sniffing into the byways for possible danger. Cho-Muluh and a few carriers and guards formed the tail of the group.

Asobo-Ntsi was in high spirits and talked about his victory against Nnkaa. He had hurried through the rituals of acknowledgements to the Gods, shortly after the victorious party had returned from the hills with their prisoners, and all evening the palace had echoed to the pulse of feasting. Even those who had doubted the soundness of the campaign had to admit that somehow it was necessary and that Asobo-Ntsi was justified in his pride.

They chattered along, the talk making the distance insignificant.

'From Atisong,' he was saying, 'we will stop in Ala'papah to see our future wife. From one victory to another; the seed must not be allowed to fallow.'

The others agreed; they had come to accept the fact that Teneng was man enough to be offered a wife. And who can now tell, with uncertainty brewing in Nyen, what might happen to the throne. They shied away from such thoughts, the Gods forbid that light should go out in Nyen when they still had a long way to walk. So it was more their thoughts and the fear of these that made them agree

unanimously to the marriage arrangements. The oldest amongst them had recalled in jest how Asobo-Ntsi himself was hardly Teneng's age before he was betrothed. Asobo-Ntsi had argued often during Council meetings that with the arrival of Nwuoupang things were never going to be the same in Nyen again. The elders had again agreed too, almost helpless in consensus, and as they descended the Ngamncho hill, the subject was once more on Asobo-Ntsi's lips. He was telling them of his plans for the young prince. He was to be enrolled into Nwuoupang's school at Tipah where he too could use Nwuoupang's tiny spear and scratch out patterns of Mungakaa, which Nwuoupang recognized at a glance and then read out aloud as if he had been born in Tipah. That was Nwuoupang's magic, which he was passing onto the people of Tipah, and why should Nyen be left out? It was even rumoured that Tipah shall rule the entire region when Nwuoupang must have left for his country across endless waters.

Suddenly there was a lapse in the walk of the people; they shielded their eyes and stretched out their necks to see ahead, down in the valley as their feet dragged against the bumpy edges of the path. From below, moving in a single file toward the royal entourage, were seven men. From the white cone-like caps they wore, it was clear that they were Nwuoupang's soldiers. The talking among the Nyen people reduced to whispers and then died out completely, as they came to a stop. Asobo-Ntsi was convinced that Nwuoupang was already impatient for tax money. But there were two others among the approaching group without caps.

Moussa son of Petsa tugged Cho-Muluh gently and whispered, when the latter turned, 'Hold my bundle for a while and let me step into the bushes; the palmwine we drank will not stay in my stomach.'

And true enough his stomach was turning at the sight of Nwuoupang's men. He had never forgotten the day they came into Nyen and dragged his brother away to build their God's house at Tipah. The memory of the brutality stayed with him and whenever he saw one of them he felt as if his knees were watery, and his bladder too was weak.

Cho-Muluh relieved him of his load and Moussa sneaked into the bushes, and knew that it was only respectable to move some distance further. When he was out of earshot of the Fon's company,

he directed his feet back toward the village.

‘Feet of mine,’ he muttered silently, knowing that he had to flee from imminent danger, ‘what did I ever eat without giving your share?’ He had long concluded that belonging to Asobo-Ntsi’s entourage was an unfortunate accident in his life; he was not one to live for heroism, and usually reminded his mocking friends that it was the coward who returns home with generations between his thighs after a war. Why should he follow blindly even in the footsteps of royalty and end up as a slave to Tipah, when he could have stayed at home and enjoy his evening meal as a coward and wait for the prospects of coming days? He was cutting through the hilly undergrowth like a mad bull, invoking his feet to take him to where there will be promise of a dish on the evening.

Meanwhile Nwuoupang’s team had reached Asobo-Ntsi, and stood apart in awkward greetings. But Asobo-Ntsi only acknowledged their compliments mechanically, for amongst the group of strangers were two of his own people from Nnkaa, Ngyim and Mornkaa, who looked away without betraying anything.

‘Where can Asobo-Ntsi be going to so early in the day?’ the leader of Nwuoupang’s men said in Mungakaa, with a fixed smile on his face. But he did not bow, nor any of the group, although they stood on one side of the road. Sa’amontoh’s heart beat faster and his fists itched to grasp the leader’s fat neck in his hands and squeeze the bones under his vengeful strength.

‘Asobo-Ntsi should be the one to be told where you are taking his people to,’ the Fon fired back. ‘They are criminals!’ he flared, overlooking protocol. He knew where and when to be ceremonial, and of course with who. He considered all those working for Nwuoupang as mindless miscreants.

‘They are taking us to Ashong,’ the other replied quickly, the smile still on his face like a landmark. ‘Your people are so stubborn, Asobo-Chi, and will not accept Nwuoubang’s house of God.’ His accent was biting repulsive, twisting familiar words with blind arrogance.

‘It is not for my people to show you the way to Ashong, then; it does not concern them.’

‘They have been recruited by Nwuoupang,’ the leader announced, spitting out tobacco chaffs through his thick black lips. He knew Asobo-Ntsi would be infuriated by his careless attitude, but

then he was the White man's messenger with unquestionable invincibility when dealing with natives, especially recalcitrant ones.

'That is a lie, Chamfa!' Sa'amontoh barked out, 'only yesterday, they disobeyed Asobo-Ntsi and were chased into the bushes!'

'That is why they ran to Nwuoupang for protection,' the other laughed in derision.

'Let us go,' Asobo-Ntsi said to his train; he had heard enough, and besides, his business was not with a Tipah slave who thought himself the master. He, Asobo-Ntsi, would never give in to Nwuoupang, like Tipah, for all his people to be transformed into slaves; he knew what to get from his engagements with Nwuoupang and will do so without any loss of dignity.

The two groups parted, the one moving up hill, and the other descending into the woods and the shadows. It was soon clear that Moussa had abandoned the group. Speculations were made over his disappearance and from time to time one of them will look back to see if her were in sight.

'I always told myself that that big head is no good in my entourage,' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'he is such a coward I am afraid he shall never be able to meet his wife like a man.'

And they laughed, moving on. But they were also worried about the presence of the two men from Nyen with Nwuoupang's men and as they discussed this it became obvious that Nnkaa must have sent a delegation to Nwuoupang. This instead emboldened Asobo-Ntsi, and he was convinced that he had a strong case for Nwuoupang's ears, even if his tax money was incomplete.

Chapter Sixteen

The chameleon had come from across distant lands to thwart man's eternity. He became man's enemy and in dead, bore his illness to the land of the death. How can we befriend a chameleon when he devised falsehood in order to inherit a world of tiny, wriggling things? But his lineage was to spread like the wild wind and smelled Nyen's fertile sanctuary from which the sun rose with a new promise every morning.

It was 11 a.m., the hour when the prisoners returned to camp for breakfast, when Asobo-Ntsi led his delegation into the Colonial Fort in Atisong, slightly exhausted by the steep climb that had curved through the rolling hill from Agha'ngu's land. One of the guards was using a plaited ostrich wing to fan him, in slow waves of caressing breeze of the Atisong heights. And often Asobo-Ntsi would cough, and almost mechanically the echo of Tsa-apifor will pass through the men, under their breathes, almost reluctant, Asobo-Ntsi thought, in their own exhaustion.

The brick walls of the Fort were a painful reminder to Asobo-Ntsi and his entourage, surveying the stiff-pillared structures of baked brick that had ruined many sons of Nyen. Some had never returned home and it was rumoured that either they had died and been buried in mass graves, or were still alive and served as slaves in Tipah.

Asobo-Ntsi led his men through an arched gateway into the wide courtyard of Nwuoupang's ceremonies. The Fon always envied the yard every time he visited the place even if his heart was still bitter that so many of his men had to disappear for the place to be put up.

A sleek-face guard in khaki approached them from his post, at first timidly, but on recognising Asobo-Ntsi's regalia, he stooped in humility. Even without asking he knew Asobo-Ntsi was there either to complain or to answer a summons. He led them to a shaded corner where Asobo-Ntsi's stool was placed at the trunk of the tree. Without another word, the guard dashed off to the office at the far

end of the yard and gently tapped on the door.

Scott Brown had been glued to his chair since 6 a.m. His office was at the end of the administrative block at Fort Bismarck, a red brick enclosure that surprisingly made him feel at home. The name of his hideout worried him with a guilty conscience that knew no appeasement, but then he was unable to find a suitable Anglo-Saxon or more specifically, Anglicised substitute. Every attempt sounded false even to his patriotic lips and he was resigned to the vanquished relic, and consoled himself that after all, one needed his relics, friendly and alien, and so Fort Bismarck it was going to be. It was a convenient conclusion that was aided by the fact that the Germans themselves had not really discriminated along blood lines, in their description of the place. 'From the glories of little Switzerland,' one of the carbon-dispatches he discovered in the files stated. And looking out at the rolling and interlocking mountain ranges that folded unto themselves like a place at the beginning of time, Scott only regretted that it was not the English but the Germans who conceded to such impartiality. The huge windows made the office as airy at times as if he were standing on the edge of the cliff and looking at the wild expanse of his dominion. For, in Atisong he felt himself the petit prince of this 'little Switzerland,' who inscribed awe in the hearts of the natives. Not that he was proud of the privilege and often cringed while watching them sweat under the load of igneous rocks with which to expand or reinforce the place; yet a man had to take what the world offered him in spite of himself. So Scott took Atisong as his experimental patch in an empire whose sun was perhaps just beginning to set although no one in London seemed to see the signs just yet. Accustomed to rise at the habitual hour when only the most hardened prisoners were emptying waste containers, he shrugged off every worry about his isolation in such a peripheral dessert and dutifully initiated the task of shouldering the colonial cross. He was dedicated to the task almost to a fault. Each day replicated the previous one and anticipated the next, only that the cross grew heavier with each setting sun. It was his Golgotha, he joked to friends back home, and he would stand by the window and contemplate the vagrant stretch of pristine abandon.

With his sleek face that almost cracked under the strain of the biting dry cold; and shrewd peering eyes lingering over volumes and pages, he was contented with a habit he had come to love. His thoughts rushed out with coherence in the cold tropical morning, and his reports, written at such moments, were vital to his mission, focused. He had to make updates, review schedules, and ascertain conclusions, and with the sharp morning air cutting across the ridge of his nose, he suddenly felt like a man in control of his life. After five and a half years in the place, he was certain that no other earthly kingdom would tempt his heart the way the chilly heights did, with a generous view that overlooked the expanding territory of his authority. In his moments of relaxation when he wandered across the hilliness and over its rough-edged cliffs and boulders, and then recalling the now very distant luxury of a Spring morning in England, Scott often wondered at the morality of such total domination as he represented, an eternal figure of awe amongst the natives who were only too glad to be seen paying him homage, or so it seemed. He was flattered too, even with the vague sense of rebuff at the authority he personified, and pitied the lords back home with their meagre acres of land which grudgingly offered them a pitiful so-and-so per annum yields. At such moments too, he understood, or tried to understand, the spiritual meaning of the God-Save-the-King liturgy, lest his own paradise be in doubt. Looking down from the heights of his reign, and counting his blessing across the blessed and uncreated view, he felt like the Saviour tempted by the ghost of a German devil in his own heart, in a challenge of guilt. For, the vandals had battered the precincts in their sturdy moment of glory, planted the future in burned brick and concrete, before the King had inherited it collaterally after 1919 (although they managed not to be that blunt) and now that devil can only tempt him against his desires with the grudge of burnt fingers. Every hero his moment, he whispered to himself, with a fatalistic sense of an ending yet to be perceived.

Scott pushed back his chair and leaned back against the wall, tilting the chair in the process, a slight twist on his face. He was aware of the ever watchful image framed as inscrutable authority behind him and to which he acquiesced even in his rebellious moods. Yet, his reports had been corrupted by a weakness for the land in which he reigned subjectively. He became romantic for instance, when giving the description of a district where he had resolved a

border dispute. The trembling feeling that the landscape evoked in him, the fluttering feeling of insatiability, became distinctive features for his superiors to appreciate and understand. And once, a year or so ago, Lagos had reprimanded such 'uncalled for nonchalance in dreamy imagery' that ruined his reports, footnoting a similar though milder grudge from Buea as supportive evidence down the chain of command. Scott had laughed aloud, going over the line again, and comforted himself with a phrase that he came to love, namely that they don't know who don't see. But he was cautious, thence, to weed out the least insinuation of what would be misconstrued in Lagos, and who knows, even in London, as nonchalance. So for fear that his lordship may be threatened in this uncreated land, he made editorial concessions.

There was a slight knock on the door, when he seemed to have been going through eternity with his work, and he looked up. He was not expecting any visitors and his servants knew better than to disturb him then.

'Yes, come in!' he said.

The door creaked and the messenger came in and seemed to be walking on eggs.

'What is it?' the gravy voice of Scott barked from behind his mahogany table and his huge moustache worked awkwardly as if his very words came from there.

'Other visitor, Sah,' the messenger gabbled, wiping away bits of kolanut he had been chewing from his thick lips. That image had been glued to Scott's apprehensive mind right from the start of his mission, and even without bothering to look he always imagined a gaping mouth, crude and bushy, with scattered teeth and bits of kolanut littering the vacuous periphery.

Scott again looked up, confused. He experienced a similar scenario the previous evening when he had been disturbed at dinner, with the same babbling confusion from his Boy.

'Some tringer, Sah!' the boy had hissed, stiff with duty, his eyes straying over the plates and dishes, and regretting, Scott knew, that he was not part of the kitchen staff.

Scott Brown laid down his fork and passed a scarf over his lips but he could have been mopping the bushy moustache and when he screwed up his eyes he looked like a squirrel forced into a tight corner by hunting dogs.

‘What stranger, Boy?’ Scott said, cocking his head, ‘Where from?’ he added in explanation.

‘No idea, Sah!’ the messenger said, a twinkle in his eyes, desperate because he was ignorant. He knew his master wanted everybody around him to be ‘straight upright!’ No matter how hard he tried, he always faltered.

‘No idea where they come from, Boy?’ There was habitual wonder in Scott’s voice; he always took it for granted that no native could ever doubt the hole from which his brother sneaked out, even as sneaky as their sly looks told one nothing.

‘Atall, atall Sah! Four in number; one tall, two short, and one big-big.’ The messenger was grinning consciously as if he was one of Rev. Smith’s hopeless Catechumens and had successfully rehearsed a Mungakaa text about the salvation of the native. His eyes twinkled in his excitement. ‘Pure black monkeys, Sah,’ he added with the acquired pride of one who knew where the White man the slept and the images that pop up in is dreams.

‘Okay, Boy,’ Scott nodded, ‘show them in.’

The messenger knuckled himself out of the door and closed it with a rare bang. The visitors had to know that there was a difference between natives in the vicinity of the white man.

Presently, there was another scratchy knock on the door and the messenger came in and stood aside. Scott looked up and screwed his eyes to focus on the four men standing there and trembling with uncertainty. They were almost of the same height and one was slightly bald and all of them had thick moustaches, drooping over their mouths. Scott noted with almost inexplicable relief that they had fat noses and thick lips and blank eyes like the rest of them. He could see that his messenger had spent some time trying to tidy them up. Their ntums had been adjusted so that the front part was less offensive to the cultured eye, and Scott knew that they were going to back out of the room when they were through, without turning. That was the messenger’s innovation, arguing in defence of his actions that the blacks had jiggers in their buttocks.

‘What is it you want now?’ Scott said after sizing them up, an edge to his voice. ‘Who has seized your wife this time?’

There was no response; the men only stared at him and then at each other in confusion. Scott decided to change his approach. He had come to understand that you needed to stab a native really deep

before he could open his mouth to even whisper an emotion that was killing him. But these were decidedly strange.

‘What ... come ... you ... for here, eh?’ He was friendly, and deliberately slow, pushing aside his plate. One of his recent corner stones as Colonial Administrator was the success of the adult classes all over his dominion, where the natives were catching up on the alphabet, giving him additional reason to scrawl out pages of overwhelming sentimentality to Lagos, although some of the villages like Bapinyi were still to catch on.

‘Hell, Boy, can’t they even open their traps?’ he cried out, suddenly red in the face. ‘Then what did they come sneaking in here for? Will you get them to speak in your hideous language!’

But the messenger was even more embarrassed, shifting uncomfortably on his spot.

‘I not understand them, Sah!’ he said in desperation after catching bits of his master’s frustrated outburst.

‘Then what’s the use of having you in this forsaken spot?’ It always pleased Scott, when he was alone and relaxing, to recall such scenes when he consciously acted out emotions that were alien to his cultivated fraternity with the place. But this was official business, and he had to appear officious, otherwise these natives would take him for a playmate sooner than he could imagine.

‘Tamenji!’ he shouted over his shoulder.

‘Sir, coming!’ a voice said from an adjoining room where his dresses were ironed and laid out to be used the following day, at times for the whole week, and almost immediately the side door opened with a sharp creak and a tall lanky man stooped in, constrained by the door and walking as if he were going to break in two. His starched shirt was neatly tucked in and he stood erect in front of Scott like a needle.

‘Here, Sir!’ Tamenji said with exaggerated loyalty. He loved his job and knew that his master would not hesitate to throw him out if he were to be otherwise.

‘Get them out of my sight,’ Scott said, waving at the strangers, ‘and ask them where they come from, and why.’

Tamenji relaxed, realising that it was as easy a task as the ABC he was sweating to implant into the skulls of his people, in vain.

‘Yes, Sir,’ he said, and ushered Ndofoh and Ntahpong out of the room.

When they were out Scott looked at the messenger with something like doubt in his eyes.

‘How comes you can’t understand these ones, Tebid?’

‘Not that Sah, atall!’ the messenger protested, ‘only dem vex a lot plenty; only wan’ tok to Massah.’ Tebid was shaking his head as he spoke, as if to say those two were untamed.

‘Then why could they not open their mouths when they saw me?’ Scott said.

Tebid grinned proudly with an intimacy that Scott knew should be stopped before it got out of hand.

‘But dem not understan’ one single word, Sah!’ he said; ‘O’course like pure black monkey!’ Then he shuffled toward the side door and eavesdropped. ‘Hear dem now, Sah ... pure parrot!’ he declared.

‘Okay now, don’t be a damn parrot yourself,’ Scott said, in a dismissive tone.

Disappointment crossed Tebid’s face as he straddle out of the room.

‘Yes Sah,’ he said in a confessional voice.

Scott merely touched at the food on his plate, his appetite gone. His dinner was usually an important ceremony when he knew he was living, and accorded it almost ritual attention especially when he had no guests. But now his desire had been ruined, he thought, pushing away the plates and dishes, and reached out reluctantly for the bunch of bananas.

He did not hear Tamenji come in, a broad grin on his face.

‘What do they want?’ Scott said, unable to suppress the rising bile from his voice.

‘Another abominable case of black savagery, Sir!’ Tamenji announced with the unabridged enthusiasm of a man who could decipher any jungle babble. ‘They say their Fon murdered ten innocent villagers last Tuesday for his juju and mutilated even more yesterday and abandoned the corpses on the hills.’

Scott laid down the banana without peeling it, and pondered over the report for a while, his mind already racing after indecent ritualistic possibilities and conclusions. He nibbled at his fingernails, a reflexive attitude of his once he was in thought, wondering where the trails of native sentiments he was chasing and trying to be connected with, would finally lead.

Then he looked up, from the distance of his own thoughts, overwhelmed by what he did not know.

'They must be absolutely sure of this charge!' he said. 'Can they provide evidence?'

'I'm afraid not now, Sir,' Tamenji said with a slight quiver in his throat; 'but they say they can lead us to a waterfall where the corpses were dumped.'

Scott was again silent. Such reports always made him cold with a vague premonition of the world crashing into irredeemable bits; he felt the cramps of unknown fear around his bowels, a harried consciousness of sneaking presences against his immanence. Then he would hurry for his medication after work, forever scared of another malaria bout, after the first that had nearly parked him back home barely six months in the colony in a coastal suburb. But this case disturbed him differently; he had dispatched some of his men early that morning following similar reports, only that there was no mention of Tuesday killings and a waterfall.

'Sounds to me like the same case we had last night,' Scott said with a wondering expression on his face.

'Excuse me Sir,' Tamenji said, 'but I doubt it.'

Scott ruffled his hair in a gesture of desperation.

'Dispatch the soldiers immediately,' Scott said, becoming the colonial commander he was meant to be. 'Chamfa should lead them. If they can corroborate the allegations, the recalcitrant Fon should be arrested together with his accomplices.'

'Yes Sir!' Tamenji said, always glad to pass on such commands to his juniors who on their part were often flattered into mistaken notions of rank because of their weapons.

'But who may be this savage Fon?' Scott said as an after-thought.

Tamenji smiled knowingly; he had been expecting the inevitable question, the result of which Scott fed his dairy with before slipping into his net-enshrined bed, always fascinated at 'the unpredictable flow of emotions in these natives.'

'The one you have erroneously baptised as a faithful servant, Sir ... Asobo Chi,' Tamenji said triumphantly.

'You don't mean it!' Scott cried, incredulous. 'Asubo will never degenerate to such invertebrate savagery.'

'That is what you always say, Sir,' Tamenji said, savouring

every moment of the air of friendly chatting that often punctuated commitment to his boss. 'But the two men are even prepared to swear on the Holy Book even though they don't understand a thing in it!'

'Then it were better Asubo had good reasons for doing this!' Scott said, biting his words with the regrettable awareness of one betrayed. He had been congratulating himself in successive reports about the success of His Majesty's civilising mission in breeding a corps of traditional rulers who embraced his guidelines with savage enthusiasm. He had even footnoted Asobo-Ntsi's name in one of the reports as an ideal enthusiast who, with time, will be cultivated and polished into the desired instrument of imperial benevolence. Now his own sly irony was bouncing back into his face, shattering every conviction he had groomed as testimony of his imagined sainthood.

'You can never say with these uncivilised rulers, Sir,' Tamenji said. His voice was invading Scott's wandering consciousness with remote familiarity. 'They have horrible juju houses where they drink blood with the insane belief that nothing can hurt them. From what I gather, this one seems to be a clear case of psychological hypnotism Sir.'

'Okay, just make sure that you don't hypnotise me too,' Scott said, painfully aware that he had been taken in by Tamenji's narration, which included bits of his own descriptions, and hated to be perceived by his subordinates as weak and dependent for explanations. 'Go and see to it that Chamfa gets ready. They must return by tomorrow afternoon.'

Tamenji bowed and went out. He was satisfied with the way he had managed the conversation, even if the latter could not admit it openly, and hoped that with some luck his tongueprints would influence his master's report, directly or indirectly. A youthful spring came into his steps as he crossed the gravelled yard over to the huts that housed the guards whose duties were never defined, and no one cared to, because they were useful for anything that was arbitrarily defined within their crude competence. Even Tamenji had come to realise that the humbug of aesthetic definitions was an unnecessary privilege to such circumstantial creatures. He was happy to be slightly out of the vague category. He was expecting a three-month study leave to Lagos that would coincide with Scott's annual leave. But the boss was often reluctant to take his leave, usually insinuating that it

would be more useful for him to spend it in arrears. But on his part, Tamenji could not wait to be back in Lagos, the place where, some years ago, he had succeeded in having a foothold in the White man's hemisphere, and who knows, this time he may take the rare leap to London!

Left alone, Scott became aware of the incurable pressure of the jungle empire on him. Isolated from his kind, and burdened with a responsibility that defied definition, he felt the pressure seep into his veins like a burden. He loved his job though, had come to love it almost passionately, and it disturbed him that he could never fully master the terrain of his adventures. Yes, they were adventures from which he was scribbling out volumes of his soul as intellectual nonsense (his father-in-law's piqued phrase) that could easily earn him a place at Oxford as professor of tropical anthropology or some other civilised catchphrase, if they were ever to be published in his lifetime. But if only London will learn how to recognise good stuff with feeling once they saw one!

He had gone to bed with a divided mind, reluctant for once to say his evening prayers and almost afraid of what he was beginning to love with unknown passion. He got up the following morning at precisely the same time, and having assured himself that the soldiers had left (even if they could only leave that morning because of the dangerous terrain which they were to cross, as Tamenji convinced him, before adding that to be sure the natives were not of bad faith he had detained two of them), Scott confronted his work with the same committed brutality that was now akin to his faith in the mission he was out there to serve. He bent over his papers and crossed out the intruding sentimentality from his reports that would make his bosses develop stomach ulcers, and then read over the paragraph again. It was an unemotional dumping of facts with no personal touch of the keen and committed observer. He grimaced at the lack of style and reached out for his cigar smouldering in the wooden tray. If the fools upstairs wanted it dull he was going to feed them with tons of such garbage until they groan out in protest. Scott could never conceive of any correspondence that was not based on the feel of the place. That was probably why the Germans lost hold of the place, he told himself: there was always a price to be paid for exaggerated pragmatism soaked in a mug of nationalism. Scott could see the English people slipping into the German slough too, maybe

only slowly, due to their natural bias for restraint. He shrugged, thinking how it will feel to spend the rest of his days in retirement in this closed land of uncreated beauty, isolated from the patterned froth of civilised manhood. Once in a while he got up and paced about absent-mindedly, suddenly restless, and alarmed that he was stressing himself a lot, for nothing. The narrow space of his office had become the refuge for his thoughts, holed up in his own heart with sentiments that would be dismissed without consideration by those who were too cowardly to dare the indescribable jungle and were only good for tea-room gossips about this chap or that performing as expected in the colonies, or otherwise, designing further schemes for the deep interior of India or Africa without the least imagination to accommodate such fringes of the King's civilisation. Scott was standing by the window and felt the mountain breeze in his watery eyes with sensuous familiarity, and tried to read the signals from his own thoughts, planting themselves so tenuously in his mind. It was a battle for his own convictions against the overwhelming will from the smokescreens upstairs, stiffened by their lust for tradition.

Time ticked on, Scott was unaware of it, closed up in his thoughts and knew that the civilisation for which he fought may end up swallowing him. Else, how could it be so insensitive to the mood of the place, which he, as the feelers of that civilisation transmitted from the colonies?

But he returned to his papers again and scribbled blindly, not caring anymore about the facts that crashed through his brains like natives screaming at each other, quarrelling. He was suddenly bored, non-committal in his engagement, and felt estranged from the heart of his own interest. It irked him so that his reports were usually mutilated by the time they reached London – the insidious bureaucratic trail through Buea, then down to Lagos and finally London, a process that usually took months – and so it was useless, he had concluded, to continue giving so much of himself away to a system that couldn't feel. Even Knights and conquerors, he had come to realise, must concede a certain vulnerability of vision eventually. Only then could they channel what he had referred to in one of his rash reports as 'the unprocessed spirit of infantile crudity' into mainstream culture. 'It was inevitable concession,' he had concluded with a stubborn rebuff, almost laughing at the system, 'if

we hope for a sustained acceptability of our messianism in the salvaged suburbs of our Civilisation.' He was bitter, and contrary to all persuasive anecdotes about the health of matrimonial fellowship from his grey father-in-law still creeping along the inscrutable corridors of the Colonial Office in London, Scott was already bracing himself up in rebellion, to retire into the forest, away from the gloss of the civilisation he was helping to construct.

Then his Boy had come in with his announcement of 'Other visitor, Sah,' and quickly added, 'Da big, big man, Sah ... your flend.'

Scott glanced at his watch and frowned; he was expecting no friend, and in fact he had regrettably seen off Smith just two days ago, back to his station in Victoria, and expected no other visitor for the next two weeks.

'Big man? Then show him in,' he said, weary with the ritual of formal receptions and dismissals, when he then had to wait in vain for something to come of it. He shuffled a few sheets about, not knowing what to expect. The door opened again and the grinning messenger stood aside stiffly, and Asobo-Ntsi came in with the awkward air of regality, which he carried with him wherever he went, and gathered the folds of his gown over his shoulder with unhurried dignity.

Scott could not hide his surprise, and silently cursed the messenger for putting him in such an unwarranted state of speculation.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, 'Asubo, what barbarism is this I'm getting about you!'

Asobo-Ntsi's grin grew broader, and he nodded repeatedly as Scott sputtered at him, as his entourage crowded in. Scott recovered himself, aware that he was only screaming to himself in a jungle wind.

'But have a seat,' he said invitingly, pointing to one of the two armchairs in his office. Asobo-Ntsi's smile froze and he stared at the chair suspiciously and then at the servant bearing his stool. The latter hurriedly placed the stool at a distance away from Scott's table and dressed it with a tiger skin. Asobo-Ntsi sat down and beamed at Scott who could not help smiling, always at a loss at the ceremonial exhibition of these native rulers. He always reminded himself to allow them settle themselves next time but, always, he acted before realising with embarrassment the incongruity of his concern.

'Grad, Nwuou pang, grad!' Asobo-Ntsi was saying, as his

people clustered around him with protective suspicion. Scott nodded in return, understanding.

‘But tell me,’ he said deliberately slow, ‘what is this about murder and mutilation?’ Asobo-Ntsi gaped at him in a blank stare, his broad smile still fixed in place.

‘Jesus, he’ll never understand me!’ Scott cried lamentably. ‘Tamenji!’ he called, and almost immediately, as if by remote control, the side door opened and Tamenji breezed in and took in the scene with one quick look.

‘He’ll never understand my tongue,’ Scott said with a lame gesture at Asobo-Ntsi, ‘can you please explain the charge against him?’

Tamenji turned toward Asobo-Ntsi and bowed in greetings, clapping with cupped hands.

‘Mbee,’ he began, ‘two pipou come report palaver here for Big Man.’ He paused and regarded Asobo-Ntsi, to let the declaration sink into him before continuing; ‘Dem say you kill and kill plenty, plenty pipou. True or false?’

Asobo-Ntsi cocked his head in a pose of mixed doubt and embarrassment. Then Tamenji began explaining to him in Mungakaa when suddenly Asobo-Ntsi sprang to his feet, consternation on his face.

‘Me Asobo-Ntsi!’ he declared, facing Scott, ‘yesh, witch dem all, yesh, yesh, yesh,’ he ejaculated, ‘witch all!’

‘But you kill dem?’ Tamenji persisted; ‘yes or no?’

‘Yesh, yesh, dem witch, all!’

Tamenji turned to Scott whose face had become sore red, in submission.

‘He enthusiastically pleads guilty, Sir,’ he declared with mastered sullenness.

‘I got him, Tamenji,’ Scott said. ‘But this is strange, his readiness to admit to such gruesome deeds.’

‘Not really, Sir; you are still to know them,’ Tamenji said as if to discriminate against a species to which he did not belong. ‘He is a victim of his own uncivilised convictions. He says there were witches.’

‘Yes, but how the hell does he know? Bring in those two you detained this morning,’ he said, trying to hide the look of appreciation in his little eyes at his subordinate’s foresight, returning

to his seat.

Tamenji nearly bumped into the cook at the door as the latter brought in Scott's tea on a wooden tray with sweet potatoes cut in crooked slices and fried in palm oil. Scott gestured him to place it on the side table by the window. His appetite had suddenly disappeared and he knew the cook was going to be disappointed. It was always a pleasure for him to demonstrate to his fellow natives that there was one of them privileged enough to know what was good for the white man's stomach.

Tamenji came in with the two natives who shrank convulsively at the sight of the royal company. Asobo-Ntsi in turn was regarding them murderously, and his lower lip trembled.

'Achu-Fongwi!' he exclaimed, gesturing at one of his guards. 'Bring him, here!' he said.

'Asobo Shi!' Scott shouted, understanding the implications of the gesture and utterance; 'you must be getting out of your mind!' He was getting used to the blood-cuddling language that made their lips tremble in a wordless confrontation.

Then he calmed down again, realising that the other was still not understanding him.

'You must respect Administration,' he said with slow emphasis; 'I ask questions, not you, understand?'

Asobo-Ntsi gestured at the two frantically.

'Yesh, dem ... ma pipou,' he cried, 'and crim'na, so ah come tell Nwuoupang' he added. He was struggling for expression, and the bits of Pidgin he had picked up during previous visits and arrangements by Scott, were dissenting him at a critical moment. Yet, to his notables, Asobo-Ntsi was a sudden revelation in utterance, a process that began when he hosted a Tipahman for three moons on special assignment by Scott, to ensure that his native back-up understood him minimally. Those were the beginnings of his friendship with Nwuoupang, he always reminded those who doubted his authority and suspected his alliance with the red-skinned stranger.

'Dem say you kill ten pipou,' Tamenji said, making appropriate gestures, 'cut throat for plenty and burn dem house, na true?'

'Yesh!' Asobo-Ntsi said with unrestrained fervour, 'witch and crim'na, dem all!' he said.

Tamenji turned again to Scott.

‘Once more, Sir,’ he said, ‘he readily admits his guilt, typical of uncivilised leadership.’

Scott was silent, evidently troubled. There was something wrong somewhere, which he was impatient for investigations to unravel. He was still to see a native admit his own crimes so passionately even if they were royal crimes. He was beginning to regret that he had groomed so much confidence into Asobo-Ntsi, when he thought measured privileges would inspire the native leadership to embrace his mission without reserve. Of course such a strategy had been necessary in order to surreptitiously infuse the rigour on which His Majesty’s mission was based, into them who had ruled and still did so with unrestrained anarchy. But now there was need to again moderate, even break anew, the likes of Asobo-Ntsi.

‘Let him know then,’ Scott said, turning to Tamenji in a formal voice that inscribed distance, ‘of my personal dejection at such unscientific and unholy action.’

His eyes lingered for a while on the portrait of the King framed on his table. An ironic smile flirted on his lips as he recalled the doctrines of service in some back room of the Colonial Office in London, hooting the need to install the Empire, meaning His Majesty’s dream, into every crack of the good Lord’s earth. He was only half listening to Tamenji’s broken syntax, parroting the stereotyped babble with faith.

‘Master vex plenty, Asobo-Chi,’ Tamenji was saying, shaking his head; ‘Administration no give order to kill and burn and ... mutilate, yes. You no bring tax all, like Tipah, you only kill from morning to shine-time till evening. Master vex plenty. So you wait here, soja go investigate your land, then report for Master.’

Then he turned to Scott with a broad smile of accomplishment, his lean face filled with satisfaction.

‘Good,’ Scott said, observing the contortions of the other’s face, and then pointing at Achu-Fongwi and his companion, he added, ‘Take these two away.’ A slight toss of the head was enough for Tamenji to know that his moment of supremacy was over. As he walked out of the room, and across the yard, his mind again strayed back to the prospects of further studies as he had come to describe it, and wondered if he was actually creating the appropriate impression on Scott. With a heavy sigh that could have meant anything, he kicked his way across the yard.

‘Evaristus,’ Scott was calling for the messenger, and at the same time offering Asobo-Ntsi one of his familiar, disarming smiles.

‘Sah!’ Evaristus said, presently popping into the room and regarding the natives as if to show them the heights from which he looked at them.

‘Take Asubo-Shi to Nigger Quarter,’ Scott said, ‘and attend to him personally. Ask Nicodemus to teach him more English, okay?’

‘Yesh Sah!’ the other replied, turning to Asobo-Ntsi and talking to him in Mungakaa. Scott was only beginning to catch a few words and was sometimes overcome by fear that the effort of submitting himself should sooner or later weary him into insanity. At such moments, also, he dreamed of a common colonial language from the fringes of empire that could express feeling as exactly as desired, a unique tongue, supreme, without ethnic cleavages, at least for all those who clustered under His Majesty’s wing, and bowed to him Scott, the intermediary. But he had also learned in the malarial heat never to dream; the sheer effort of diving into the net every night to escape from the ferocious creatures distracted even an ardent dreamer.

After Asobo-Ntsi and his group had been led out of the office, Scott stood for a while lost in his own thoughts. He was beginning to agree with his own self-evaluation that it was never safe to trust a native, whether commoner or leader. He found himself updating his well-phrased theories every other day, his own assumptions and conclusions were collapsing before his very eyes even before he thought of implementing them – if ever that were to be possible. Nothing was certain any more, in a situation where he thought his thumbprint was already evident. For, he was mutely shocked by the possibility of a committed Chief like Asobo-Ntsi guilty of the charges against him. A certain naivety of presumptuousness visited Scott Brown as he stood in the middle of his burned brick office in the October winds listening to his heartbeats fusing with jungle rhythm.

As he turned to go back to his table he noticed the tea things on the smaller table, but his taste for it had vanished.

Chapter Seventeen

It is the coward who ensures posterity, but hidden mysteries, preserved in haste may tell a story only to generations to come when death must have looked at us in the eye without pity.

The rhythm of times forgotten again echoed over Nyen with subdued intimidation that was gradually becoming habitual with the rise and setting of the sun; things were no longer what they used to be, would never be again. People saw this in each other's eyes, and felt it in their silence as they brooded on along the overgrown paths and simply nodded in greeting. Every male braced himself for the familiar phases of the tale, then, so often told that even children were as familiar with the end as they were with a casual morning greeting. It was the horror of life known and lived, loved and hated in the heat of fist fighting and of procreation: life known and loved and hated, now revisiting them on the very new dawn of Asobo-Ntsi's victory. But because they had lived to know it they were ready to live it again.

Frantic movements could be observed along by-ways; columns of women, their babies strapped to their backs, filed through narrow valleys toward the twin caves for safety, agitated and unsure. A few men, especially the sick and old, accompanied them. Every other man who could beat his chest and take a wife home geared up to protect Asobo-Ntsi's throne. There was no time for rituals to the Gods now. Besides, with Asobo-Ntsi and Ndiyzé out of the village, there was no one competent enough to perform such rituals. But they knew Tisagli and Qwang would never abandon them in a moment of unprovoked aggression.

Observing the chaos of activity upsetting the village, Moussa wondered what the people would do to him if in the end it proved to be a false alarm. He licked his lips, a bit scared of possibilities he could not imagine, and continued on his way, bearing royal antiquities to secret locations and marking the spots either with the numerous tree types around or the distances between them.

Once he was out of earshot of the royal entourage that morning, Moussa pleaded with his feet to take him away from

imminent death as fast as they could. He could smell foul air and did not care if they called him names. Did the Nyen people not say that it is the coward who ensures procreation after the heroes must have all been slain on the battlefield. He broke through the thick undergrowth, avoiding elevated spots along the way. Who knows, an enraged Tipah man may fire at him from the distance, aware that he, Moussa, was fleeing to alert the villagers. He was not aware of the bleeding cuts on his bare shins as he stumbled and crashed against rocks and stumps, rolled over, away from his path, before gathering himself up in defiant curses, back on his way. His lungs were full and bursting, but was he not the most respected wrestler amongst his age group who could endure a contest from morning to sundown and emerge victorious? This was the greatest contest of his life, if ever he were a wrestler!

These thoughts flew through his mind as he cut across the hills and valleys, approximating short cuts, and only focussing on his direction without doing so. He knew too that with Asobo-Ntsi out of the village, the watchers at Atuoaloon would slack in their vigilance. Their outlook was a vantage spot from where Nyen spied on Tipah invaders and Moussa recalled the night he had spotted the flickers from a great distance and had alerted Asobo-Ntsi to open up the trench that encircled the entire village and aborted a second Tipah humiliation of Nyen. Tipah had never recovered from the mortification after which they were referred to as the testis between the heavy thighs of the Nyen elephant, to be squeezed into submission at will. It was glory for Nyen, and personal honour for Moussa, given the great distance from which he had spotted the enemy. From that day his age group was re-named the Eye of Asobo-Ntsi, and he was then called up to join the Fon's private entourage.

He was panting and streaming with sweat and covered from head to foot with bits of shrub and black jar. His feet were muddy to the knees as he scrambled up the Tengehefeng hill, into the village, having preferred a longer path to avoid possible confrontation with the enemy along the usual track.

Those who set eyes on him at first dashed off, screaming. Then they stared, wondering what must have possessed the man. It was Nkap and the people were enjoying an uneasy holiday, and so a curious crowd was already gathering behind Moussa as he tore his way through the village streets.

When he reached the palace gates he collapsed in front of the guards who had rushed toward him, alarmed by the manner of his approach, from the opposite direction. Moussa could not talk for a while; he only breathed in quick heavy heaves as if he would never stop, sprawled out like a man knocked out by ngvouré.

Eventually he calmed down enough to utter a word and dragged himself up and beckoned for water. They brought a bowl-full, which he swallowed without pause and signalled for more.

'Maybe he was rushing back like that for water before he could go back to the others,' someone said.

But nobody responded to this and it passed off in the awkward tension.

After gulping the second bowl with only a brief pause, Moussa looked up and smiled almost ashamed that he had caused so much attention even without being aware of where he was.

'Nwuoupang's men are coming, all armed!' he said, with all the alarm he could muster, his voice still hoarse from exhaustion.

'Where is Asobo-Ntsi?' It was Tadtipong who asked the question, standing akimbo, a huge frown cutting across his forehead.

'On his way...' Moussa breathed laboriously.

'Was he and the rest taken by Nwuoupang's men?'

'... to Atisong,' Moussa said.

'But we have done nothing to Nwuoupang,' Ndindoh, otherwise known as the restless fighter, burst out violently; 'instead we ...'

'They were with Mornkaa and Ngyim,' Moussa cut in with impatience.

That was enough. It could only mean one thing, that Nnkaa has sought the support of Nwuoupang against Nyen! That was it.

'O ungrateful children!' Ndindoh cried out in one piercing scream that tore through every heart with unrestrained desire for vengeance. 'How can they conspire against Asobo-Ntsi,' he continued, 'who has given them more than they ever deserved?'

No one needed to be told what to do then. Everyone knew their responsibilities, always outlined by Asobo-Ntsi just in case anything ever happened to him in sleep, and only general instructions were then necessary. Not that Nyen could ever be afraid of Nnkaa; but the presence of Nwuoupang bred horror even in the most valiant of Asobo-Ntsi's fighters. But they were not going to be taken

unawares like women. Besides, they had to give Asobo-Ntsi the last honour of resistance. They also knew Nwuoupang's lust for their artefact, how he would stare and pamper their masks with awe and admiration, only unable to give them due respect, by placing say his uninitiated hand on one of the ancestral masks in the palace. They had to act fast then, otherwise Nwuoupang would sweep everything from the palace before they knew he was around.

It was about 2 p.m. when Chamfa's group was led across the Nikan sanctuary into Nyen. Three intermittent long blasts from the elephant tusk had alerted the villagers of the alien presence, and as the group walked along the overgrown path, they could feel eyes boring at them from the thicket. But they knew too that no one dare attack them then; they were merely being monitored and signals communicated through some mysterious means, indicating their progress.

When they reached the banks of the Qwang, Ngyim signalled them to stop. Then he gestured toward the valley below.

'That is it, down there ... yes, there,' he said in impeccable Mungakaa gesturing with his hand at the same time.

Chamfa regarded him suspiciously, his eyes twinkling from Ngyim to Mornkaa. Mornkaa nodded in agreement, understanding the unasked question.

'Yes,' he said, 'they are down there, our people murdered by Asobo-Ntsi; we can take you there.' His voice quavered as he spoke and shook his head in remorse.

Chamfa was experiencing a certain fear creep into his heart; he had been to dangerous places before, but here it was more than danger that he felt. It was a crippling sensation that overcame his reasoning and seemed to tickle every vein into a state of alertness, as they lingered above the thick, flowering foliage of trees that must have been there at the beginning of time, and the vapour from the fall oozed out of the leaves in foggy blindness like ritual smoke. And while he did not wish to appear a coward in front of his group he also wished the responsibility to lead at that moment rested with someone else. He fumbled inside his chest pocket for his snuff bottle and tapped the cork with an anxious air before unscrewing it. Then he fed two thumbnails of the substance into his nostrils and corked

the bottle just in time before he was seized by a sneezing feat. After a while he blew out his nose into a white handkerchief that had no resemblance whatever with its original texture and then stuffed back the cloth into his trouser pocket.

‘What are you still waiting for?’ he said turning to Ngyim. His voice had regained its previous confidence and authority, and he felt more atone to the weird surroundings with thick-foliaged trees that entangled one another in an apparent embrace of death. Then the strange eerie sounds that rose on the fog from the womb of the place, as if from some beast, doum-touh, doum-touh, as the water swirled into the concaved bowels of the pool below, and mingled with the huge sound of the fall, made their stomachs to turn, as they followed the two down the hollow enclosure.

It was a narrow track treacherously snaking along the face of the fall like the exaggerated contours that defined the map of the region in Scott Brown’s office, Chamfa thought, momentarily closing his eyes. He felt dizzy from the heights and was surprised that the two men in the lead picked out their way like rodents scurrying to their hideout.

The path wound itself round the cliff, gradually edging toward the fall itself. Some steps had been cut crudely into the path to facilitate movement although it was of little help to the strangers as they hobbled down the slope, clinging to one another and holding onto the grass that shaded the path. Already, they were being washed by the spray from the fall, first making their thick black hair to suddenly become grey before trickling down their necks.

When they finally reached level ground the pool itself was more horrifying than anything they could have imagined. The heart of the fall was a flush of foam swirling away in thick ripples that thinned out by the time they reached the bank, wasted, and then gurgled away in a bubbling slosh of moss-covered boulders at the estuary. The area around the pool had been cleared and a tripod of stones indicated the spot where a fire had been built for the possible preparation of a ritual. It would be useless to talk for the sound of the fall swallowed even the loudest human scream.

Chamfa was at a loss; he had studied the place within the brief moment of their arrival, and knew that they would never get into the hideous pool; they were sure to freeze to death if they were not swept away by the currents. No, he said to himself, retreating, he

still had his wives and children in Tipah, and Nwuoupang was not going to be with them forever. There was more reason for him to live than possibly end his life here trying to serve Nwuoupang.

He shook his head in retreat and his men understood, following. Ngyim and Mornkaa were perplexed, staring at the departing men. Without a word or signal they too followed, and dragged themselves up to the main path, already dripping from the mist.

'There is nothing in there,' Chamfa said glad to be out alive. 'Nwuoubang will be very angry with you for wasting our time.'

'But you have not looked!' Mornkaa protested; 'our people are down there.'

Chamfa laughed in a scratchy manner and seemed to tickle his men into a chorus of fitful laughter. The two Nyenmen were confused, being mocked at; there was nothing to laugh at, and was it just possible, Mornkaa thought, that the men were mad, suddenly possessed by the spirit of Qwang? The Goddess was known to destroy those who dare her precincts without supplication and flushed them in the pool below her abode or simply transform them into mindless bodies. The men from Tipah had defiled the holy grounds even from below, and were therefore easy targets.

'How do you expect us to look again?' one of the guards said; 'we were there together and saw nothing!'

'Not in the water,' Mornkaa said, 'no one entered the water.'

Chamfa and his men stared, disbelief darting into their eyes.

'But no man can come out of that place alive!' It was the same guard who had just spoken and the corner of his mouth quivered as he spoke again.

'But Crark can do it,' Mornkaa exclaimed, pronouncing the name with the awkwardness of breaking calabashes; 'he can stay under there for a whole day before coming out!' There was a victory note in his voice as if betraying a secret.

'Are you sure?' Chamfa said dubiously.

'He rubs himself over water like the ducks of Tisagli,' Ngyim agreed.

Awa-Meshi was one of the first known cases of Nyen people to have escaped and joined the white man, and for many years was presumed dead. If not of the stoicism of his father who kept on insisting that his son was still alive, that he had not yet felt the seed in

his heart go cold, burial rites would have been performed already. Then one day the man who had disappeared from the village as a sneaky boy returned, bearded and muscular. He wore white shirts and spectacles that were cracked on the left and made it a habit of walking with a cane and tilting his head in a sneering manner. He became an instant celebrity, and at first proved to be invaluable to Asobo-Ntsi as a translator. Then the Fon, who had been flirting with Scott's Pidgin bait, thought it wise to finally crossbreed his own medium and so solicited the services of Awa-Meshi whose glory was then unfathomable. Perhaps the greatest wonder of the man was his ability to swim, having spent a good part of his life abroad in Pañya and then Victoria with the local fishing communities, serving the white man. His immediate boss, Clark Tinkleton, admired the resilience of Awa-Meshi so much, and flattered the latter into a kinship that was to collapse into an outburst of weeping sentimentality on the part of the agile black fellow, the day the master boarded his ship to return home with just a glance, a flash of teeth, and a ludicrous 'Bye-Bye!' Back in the village, Awa-Meshi's ability to swim awed the people, and they even whispered that he was capable of dining with the water Gods below, and that that was why Asobo-Ntsi clung to him so much. The people of Nyen had never seen a thing like that, a man rubbing himself in water like a tadpole and then disappearing under and still come out alive while a man swallowed three lumps of achu' in normal succession!

Chamfa listened to the two men and his civilised mind modified the ordeals of Awa-Meshi. While Tipah could boast of even better swimmers, Chamfa however had to weigh the odds in this case, given the awful and apparent mysterious nature of the pool. But the confidence of the men prevailed over him and he thought, why not try, after all it will only be a Nyenman lost in case of a miscarriage.

It was also getting late, and obvious that no operation could successfully take place before nightfall. It was agreed, much against the will of Mornkaa and Ngyim, that the men should pass the night in the palace and then make contacts with Awa-Meshi very early the following morning.

The village was deserted by the time the Chamfa's men, led by Mornkaa and Ngyim, made their way to the palace. At first the two fugitives were surprised and exchanged curious glances.

'It seems your people do not want to welcome us,' Chamfa said, surveying the empty dooryards as they moved on.

'Maybe they are scared,' another added.

That was it, Mornkaa thought, and wondered why it had not occurred to him that the people of Nyen would never wait for Nwuoupang to capture them like women!

'They have escaped,' he announced with pathetic finality; 'they know what they have done and know what you can do to them.'

As they neared the palace, catcalls reached them from the bushes, curious voices, muffled and deliberately hollowed, insulting.

'Ngyim,' a voice called out, 'dogs can now take over the hearth, now that the fire is out!'

The palace was similarly deserted; it was evident that the occupants had left in a mad rush, even as they saw Chamfa and his men approaching. Some of the items they were carrying had been abandoned. Two huge masks wrapped in a skirt of fibre and three black bags containing beads and cowries were abandoned on the floor. Chamfa moved them with his leg and smiled knowingly. He knew Scott Brown would not hate him for rescuing such valuables 'for proper preservation'. That was the instruction to every aide in the colonial establishment, to which they complied faithfully.

His men were already darting through the palace, excited to be in the heart of Nyen and free to explore it the way they wanted. Chamfa had to call them to order eventually. For all he knew, Asobon-Tsi may still be in the good books of his boss. Besides, his mission was to confirm evidence of guilt, and not ransack the palace. He had to act like a soldier, not a thief, he reminded himself from the frequent sermons on professional rectitude delivered by Scott.

But one of the returning guards was more excited than the rest. He rushed to Chamfa with bright eyes, tittering in Mungakaa.

'Prisoners, Bäl' he said, 'I have discovered them, in a hut!'

The others clustered around the discoverer, including Mornkaa and Ngyim who up till then had been surveying the place with passive curiosity; a mixture of anger and regret in their dark, dilating eyes.

'I saw a kolanut tree and had scurried up to harvest a few

pod when I thought I heard weak cries coming from a nearby hut. I went closer and called out in Mungakaa. "I am Awa-nkaa", a voice responded, "disgraced by Asobo-Chi!"

"That is our Chief?" Mornkaa cried out, 'we told you!' He was accusing Chamfa and at the same time confirming a fact.

The group was led to the hut that was built in the midst of huge fig trees.

"Who is out there, friend or enemy?" Awa-nkaa's voice said from within the mud walls, weak but still firm.

"Tsa-apifor!" Mornkaa whimpered, rushing toward the door.

"Wait!" Chamfa barked in a steel voice, suddenly unfamiliar. He was the one to initiate action and take the lead, not weaklings who a moment ago could not even utter their own names for fear. He reached the door with two long strides and observed the wood, dexterously plaited with special forest twine that served as the door. Hanging from a crudely fitted bolt was a gigantic padlock, which Chamfa immediately recognised. It was certainly a gift from Scott in acknowledgement of things done or still to be done. Chamfa nodded to one of his men who used the butt of his gun and knocked off the lock from the hinges.

Mornkaa and Ngyim rushed into the hut immediately the door swung open and uttered such confused and incomprehensible sounds that the guards could not help laughing. But the emotion was overwhelming, coming from inside the hut, and affected the men observing from outside.

Chamfa stooped and looked into the dark enclosure, and could barely make out shapes huddled together and sitting on the bare floor.

'Bring them out,' he said to his men, straightening up and backing away cautiously. He walked a few steps away and began pacing the place in the manner of his own boss, whenever he was in command. Chamfa had come to savour the extra air of importance associated with such movement, detached from his men and pretending, as he knew his boss always did, to be in deep thought. His forehead was furrowed and he was making plans, and drawing conclusions, just like Scott would have done, keeping his men eternally suspended.

When he paused long after the prisoners had been brought out he counted sixteen men and silently wondered how such a small

enclosure could have contained so many human beings. But that was sufficient ingredients for his report to Scott. The white man, he knew, needed facts in every situation, and suddenly, Chamfa realised that this was going to be a major break through for him. If well handled this could turn out to be the campaign of his career, pushing him up the rungs of authority even beyond Tamenji.

The detainees had been bound hands and feet in such a way that movement was significantly limited. They had been bundled together in pairs and the cord between their feet and then that holding the pair together was long enough for only minimal shuffling, an exercise which often resulted in a pair stumbling over the others. But they did not curse, aware that their real enemy was beyond the muddled enclosure.

They looked tired and worn out, and smelled of urine, and Awa-nkaa could hardly speak. He had refused food ever since they were captured, and vowed to die without tasting a morsel if they were not freed. Chamfa listened to the men, then resumed his pacing, thinking of nothing. It was already clear to him that Asobo-Ntsi was a culprit who could not escape the white man's trap.

Evening was already descending on the village. They had to make sleeping arrangements. He assigned two of his men to work with the recalcitrant villagers and see where they could safely sleep in the palace. The evidence of the liberated prisoners had boosted his enthusiasm for more glory and he was determined to explore the waterfall in the morning before returning to Atisong. Scott would understand, he concluded, when he finally realises the extent of Asobo-Ntsi's crimes. Pagan criminality, as Scott styled such acts, was a vice to be rooted out from the blood of the natives, and purify them with the dream of the civilisation he represented.

In his irregular pacing, however, Chamfa had made up his mind to seek out the strange Awa-Meshi for the task of the following morning. He gave further instructions to his men to this effect, for fear the man too may disappear into the bushes like the rest of his tribespeople. Mornkaa opted to take them to Awa-Meshi's house, if he was still there.

Ndengfor was known to the other queens as Asobo-Ntsi's gain. As a

princess from Ala'papah, she was the only high birth of the Fon's five wives. Her father, the old Metaa-Ndi, had been a childhood friend of Asobo-Ntsi's father, Piezouh, and their two boys inevitably struck up a friendship that was exemplary in brotherliness and pleasing to their old parents. Apart from spending alternating weeks together in the respective palaces, the two boys loved nothing more than trading in palm oil, exchanging the produce with bundled loads of corn and other grassland delicacies, and so it was unavoidable that they endured several near-death escapades, during the trips, with the more hostile people of the forest. They were gone at times for two market days and often returned with wounds that were nearly healed by the time they reach home. It was often said that their kinship fed itself on the danger they overcame without which, they themselves claimed, they would be too ordinary to live. If Asobo-Ntsi was courageous, his friend was resistant, and usually saved the day when Asobo-Ntsi's boldness was about to break. The more they ventured into the unknown, and tried to measure the length of each adversity, the greater was their desire to have more adventures and ever so renewable. And so the two boys grew up as boisterously as they were familiar in the two palaces, and it was understandable, everybody agreed, that Piezouh should give his daughter in marriage to Asah-Ndi while Metaa-Ndi offered his to Asobo-Ntsi. The weddings took place on the same day, and healthy sacrifices were offered the Gods to ensure that the two boys remain forever friends, together with their two villages, after their fathers must have moved on to the land of their ancestors.

Ndengfor was therefore a spoiled queen right from the start. Such was the partiality that both her father-in-law and husband showered on her that she could not even take care of her own daughter, when she came, barely thirteen moons after she moved into her new home. Her mothers-in-law would not let her touch the baby except when she had to apply her dripping nipple to the tender lips trembling weakly for milk. Then Teneng came after two rainy seasons, and although Asobo-Ntsi had been offered two more queens from Nyen in the meantime, everybody knew that Ndengfor was truly the first queen of Nyen. She was revered as the mother of their future Fon, and women ululated when she passed.

Then Asobo-Ntsi succeeded to the throne of Nyen and almost immediately trouble began for him and Nyen. Nnkaa wanted

the throne, even though they had offered Asobo-Ntsi a queen, and accused him of being partial to whatever thing was against Nnkaa interest. For a time Ndengfor felt unsafe in the turmoil of emotions and wondered what would happen to her and her children if the people of Nyen were to go wild against Asobo-Ntsi. Blood was revolting against blood and she was still a stranger. It had happened before, the palace bard had often reminded her in his ridiculous ways, and what would she do, beautiful queen with beautiful babies and feeding the next Fon, if the lion of the land were to be challenged? For it had happened before in those grey days when Tisagli had parched the land in the aftermath of humiliation against his hoary person, issuing from the sacred pool of his abode, to seek refuge abroad, among his spiritual ancestors of Kham, away from a cursed people he had come to despise. She had laughed with the rest of the audience, switching emotional responses as they saw fit, and then chastised and rewarded the bard as was necessary for such a crude extortionist.

‘And so it is happening again, now,’ Ndengfor said to her maids who were busy trying to re-assure her along the narrow forest tracks. But they were all confused, no one knew exactly what was happening, and her anxiety increased from the uncertainty of the situation. Even the consolation of going back home was not enough to take off the burden on her mind. Nyen had suddenly become her only home, and she accepted the fact with as much certainty as she knew the young boy with strong limbs, skipping all over the palace, was her own son, being groomed to take over from his father. But now she was not sure of anything, anymore; the people of Nyen were turning against her and her interest, even if not directly, and she could only hope that home, where she was once more headed for, would be home indeed for a second time.

They had despatched heralds ahead to the palace of Ala’papah, to inform the Fon, her brother, of what was going on in Nyen; some had also been sent to Alah-Meyiu, for it was clear that trouble was brewing in Nyen, and her friends had to be informed. The guards who were to accompany Ndengfor divided themselves into two groups. The first which also included two of Asobo-Ntsi’s slaves and who now served as carriers, was ahead of the queen and her maids, while the other group walked a respectable distance behind, throwing glances all over the place and pausing ever so often

to listen, only to realise at times that it was their own pounding hearts playing tricks on their vigilance.

Ndengfor anticipated her homecoming with no illusion. She considered herself a foreigner to her own father's land, ever since they gave her to Nyen in recognition of brotherliness. She had accepted the exchange and knew that it was not out of malice, but the result of friendship that could not be expressed, ultimately, otherwise. Her people would be happy to see her again, to have her back, even if only for a while, and give her and her children the protection they needed. For who knows what was going to happen to Asobo-Ntsi and then Nyen after that? In her heart she felt no fear; years of manly existence with Piezouh and then with her own son had hardened her, like the rest of the queens, into a stiff womanhood that was sure to baffle her people. What they still remembered was the young and shy girl who left the palace one evening, hailed by trumpets and flutes, as commodity in a bargain that she was only too pleased, if not honoured, to fulfil. But somehow, in her heart now, she felt something she could not really describe. It was not fear, but it was also not the certainty that defied doubts such as her husband represented not only for his queens but also for the rest of Nyen. It had inspired all of them to the point that they became indolent to fear and doubt, and especially for Ndengfor, she had finally accepted the fact that a woman truly had no home, and could very easily make her home across borders of stone landmarks and of fear.

She grappled with her thoughts as they passed through her mind, and mingled with the conversation that was sustained to alleviate the pressure of the day, back in Nyen. So she talked too, and even laughed when she had to, like a woman who had no trouble in the world. That too was the legacy of her life with Asobo-Ntsi even if she could not understand how things were to be now, into the dusk of the day, as they descended toward her father's home, squeezed in the interlocking valleys below. Darkness was approaching and she felt it in a personal way.

Chamfa screwed up his eyes and focused on the old man in front of him. It was a wonder that he had been found still alive, and even more so that he could have spoken out the way he did, as if it were

his last breath, looking so miserable on the edge of his grave. But his pride was confounding, simply, as he stubbornly refused to sleep in the palace, just as he had refused even to taste a morsel. He would not get up from any bed in that place, he whispered, and would curse anyone who dared to persuade him.

Chamfa shook his head in dismay, beginning to understand why he had been locked up in the first place. How could a man rescued from the grave be so proud as to turn down the luxury of sleeping in a bed, preferring the cold hills simply because of anger? What anger outlives its purpose? That was foolishness, pagan foolishness, he concluded, giving in to his own alien sentimentality. It was agreed that Awa-nkaa would not be able to walk to Atisong, and would rather delegate someone to speak on his behalf to Nwuoupang, at the right moment. He was warmed up eventually, and kept on repeating the fact that he was the Chief of Nnkaa to Chamfa, and that he should be the legitimate Fon of Nyen. And because he wanted what was his, he was locked up, his people beaten and killed, and what was Nwuoupang going to do? He must sleep in his old palace, he insisted, and the following morning he would try to assemble his people in their new settlement.

He left with four muscular men with whom he had been locked up, and whose spirits had been revived in the short interval by wine, after whispering to Mornkaa and Ngyim.

Chamfa watched him disappear into the gathering dusk with his men, and was thankful that things were moving on 'as scheduled' or nearly so. He was suddenly enjoying the assignment, giving instructions and relaxing in anticipation of results.

Awa-nkaa led his men across the Nnkaa stream in silence. They were listening to their own thoughts, individually, which echoed into the rhythm of their solemn steps, dragged along the path. It was a journey whose end they could not predict, and it was only their determination to see a new dawn, that made them to continue.

But they did not go to Awa-nkaa's former home. Instead, they cut across the slope, following the course of the stream, and doubled back toward the palace, approaching it from below. It was fairly dark now, and the thick wood through which they moved cut

off the stray light that still lingered on, beyond the woods. They were moving cautiously, at a very slow pace and with short shuffling steps, so as not to step on a dry branch. Nwuoupang's men have a funny way of sneaking into every surrounding to make sure they were safe, and even then Asobo-Ntsi's own guards would certainly come back at night to observe what was going on. Eventually, they emerged in front of the hut that had served as their prison. They went in and pulled the door after them. The darkness swallowed them and their thoughts. All they had to do was wait for dawn. Suppress a cough or a sneeze and wait, they told each other. They had waited for so long for this night, the night of their manhood, to retrieve their birthright, and initiate a people into the mystery of the living and of the dead.

The men paused again and looked back. It was now certain that they were being followed. Once or twice they had heard a twig break in the bushes, parallel to the path they were following. But they were not afraid. Chamfa had allowed them to take one of the guns along, and had reluctantly agreed to their request to shoot anybody trying to interfere with their mission.

They continued and talked as if nothing had happened. Whoever was following them was harmless; he was only monitoring their movements to be sure of where they were going and why. They walked on and talked and laughed, Mornkaa laughing more than the rest of them. He was consciously arrogant and provocative to whoever was stalking them, and challenging too. Nwuoupang was on their side, and he knew his people had never been wrong in their request for what belonged to them.

From a distance they could see a flicker in Awa-Meshi's house. He had fashioned a turukang oil lamp on his return to the village, and installed this in his house with the ostentatious air of a man who had seen the world. He even had curtains shading his two crudely-made windows, cut out of some strong silky material that simply had to be burned in order to be cleaned; and had also formed a veranda, which fronted his house and for the lack of a better breed of flowers he planted some local shrubs along the edge of the veranda. Unlike the rest of the villagers, Awa-Meshi was not scared by news of Nwuoupang's arrival in Nyen; he knew the white man

was as harmless as a larva, and he had committed no crime of which he could be guilty. So he was deaf to the entreaties of his wife and the rest of the family as they fled into the distant hills. He only assured himself, before they scurried off, that they had shown him where the food was, if he were hungry. At dusk he had inspected the compound to make sure that everything was in place. Then he had prepared a dinner of roast plantains with palm oil after which he relaxed in his favourite chair against the wall and drank warm wine, toying with the strings of his *ndenge*, a gift from a Paña friend.

He heard the footsteps even before they reached his boundary fence, and sat up to listen more attentively. Sure enough they were walking toward his house, but the strange voices did not scare. He placed his *ndenge* on a stool and as he stood up there was an authoritative knock on the door. He paused in his stride as the knock was repeated.

‘Is Awa-Meshi at home?’ Mornkaa called out, clearing his throat noisily as if to assure the occupants of the house that they were harmless. They had seen the light through the cracks in the wall, and knew Awa-Meshi was at home. ‘I come with important visitors wishing to see you.’

Awa-Meshi unfastened the door and it creaked open a crack. He peered at the dark figures suspiciously, unable to make out their faces although Mornkaa’s voice had sounded with distant familiarity.

‘I cannot see your faces,’ Awa-Meshi said, ‘but if you do not carry daggers my house is open to you.’ He stepped aside and the visitors trooped in.

‘Is it not Mornkaa himself?’ Awa-Meshi exclaimed in greeting, observing his visitor with the help of the weak lights; ‘I must be getting deaf at noon, not to have recognised your voice. You are welcome to my house although there is nothing to offer you and ...’

He looked around at the rest of the company and could not identify any familiar face, for Ngyim was standing in the shadows.

‘I have come with Nwuoupang’s messengers to take you to their leader.’

‘Why are you taking me to Nwuoupang?’ Awa-Meshi said, alarmed. ‘You know I have never spoken evil of Nwuoupang!’

‘That is why his messenger wants you to help him.’

Awa-Meshi ducked his head in a brooding mood, and his mind wandered after strands of recent happenings in Nyen that

certainly called for the attention of Nwuoupang, but nothing offered itself in explanation. He looked up again and this time saw Ngyim who had emerged from his dark corner but Awa-Meshi was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to greet him.

‘Tell me,’ he said to Mornkaa, ‘if I have done something wrong.’

Mornkaa nearly laughed at the sullen look on the other’s face distorted in the weak light. But it was instead the lead guard who spoke. He had noticed the restive look on Awa-Meshi’s face, and knew that the worst thing to happen to them was to report to Chamfa that the fellow had bolted away. That would also mean no ‘real’ evidence for Nwuoupang.

‘We come as friends of the people of Nyen,’ the leader said, ‘and wish to put an end to this palaver destroying your people.’ He spoke in very soft Mungakaa, assuring Awa-Meshi, and repeatedly emphasizing the fact that he was absolutely indispensable in the search for a solution. Nwuoupang himself has recognised that fact, and may even invite Awa-Meshi to Atisong in the days ahead.

That played the trick. What else could a man of his stature wish for, Awa-Meshi told himself as he unhooked his bag from a wall peg, now that Nwuoupang was soliciting his counsel? In his excitement he even apologised for not offering his visitors chairs and to make amends, he invited them for a drink. But the men who were already tipsy from the palace calabashes politely declined promising to come back after the urgent duty.

Atah’e returned on tiptoes, ever as cautious as a cat. It was pitch dark, but he could make out his way with ease, having squeezed in his eyes in order to peer into the dark without seeing, depending then on what he knew of the path and on what it should be like. It was at such moments that his talents as a night hunter became useful. He had observed Nwuoupang’s men for a long time, and even longer after the three of them on guard fell asleep, to be very sure. He had seen the group leave with Mornkaa and Ngyim and was confident that wherever they were going was in the interest of Nnkaa. Then they had returned after a while, this time with Awa-Meshi. Atah’e frowned, unable to figure out where the newcomer fitted into the

events. But that was not his business; he only had to watch, make sure everything was right for them to act if necessary, and then report back to Awa-nkaa.

He gave a report of his observation and the others listened.

'We will wait for the first cockcrow,' Awa-nkaa said after Atah'e was through, 'to be sure that Nwuoupang's men were fast asleep.'

So they waited in silence, and chewed kola. Once or twice they tried to converse, but their minds were too heavy for light talk. And as each of them retreated into himself, listening to the echoes of night birds, they also wondered what was happening to Nyen. For it was a land they too had cultivated, loved and protected from its enemies and were now watching as it disintegrated against itself. Was Nkaa right to let this happen even in anger? What anger was there that could not be appeased? Even the Gods cannot be forever angry with the people since libations always soothe the most ancient grudge. True, Asobo-Ntsi ruled with a heavy hand, and was the cause of many groans in the land through his intimidation and violence, but still the questions lingered on in Awa-nkaa's mind, refusing to disappear. He was burdened by the silence of their insistence, straying on and off in his mind. He was even more disturbed because he was about to sack the heart of Nyen with his men in the absence of Asobo-Ntsi and also when night had fallen on the land. Would people not call Awa-nkaa a coward? That he chose to hit a blind man when he turned his back on him?

But the night crawled on and resolve was ultimately stronger than consideration and Awa-nkaa sighed with the desperation of regret, wishing this were not really happening to him, his people, and Nyen. But he was also angry at Asobo-Ntsi; it was a battle between the two of them, the corrosiveness of blood coursing against itself, and in which the people were inevitably entangled and victimised. That was always the case, when innocence was caught in the fangs of greedy individuals, he concluded, seeking to fend for themselves, always against communal interest. It pained Awa-nkaa to reflect like this, but it was also a battle with himself, to be honest, to tell himself where Awa-nkaa was wrong or just possibly so.

Awa-nkaa knew too that Asobo-Ntsi would rage out like a castrated bull when he learned of this night, but then, Nyen would have learned too to respect the man of silence who is angered and

humiliated beyond endurance. Awa-nkaa huddled himself together, with his resolve, and knew that after tonight Nyen would never be the same again. That would also be their fortune or misfortune for having tolerated Asobo-Ntsi for so long, and made the man to believe that he was what he was not. At that time Nnkaa would be on her own, happy to live her dream in a new land without intimidation.

Then somehow he knew it was the moment to act. He was suddenly strong, his mind was alive to endure what had all along only appeared as the shadow of a prophecy. He was about to live it in fact, the prophecy coming back from the mist of time, and new blood seemed to flow into his limbs, and his whisper, commanding his people, had a strange ring to it, trembling with the echo of authority and conviction.

They filed out of the hut and trailed after Awa-nkaa, knowing exactly what to do. There was no need to hurry, for the night was still long, and when they approached Asobo-Ntsi's sleeping quarters, they could hear Nwuoupang's men snoring from the wine they had been drinking all evening. But still they had to be cautious.

They found one of the small palace gates opened and went in. The sleeping guards were sprawled out beside the smouldering fire, also snoring. Awa-nkaa led the way with ease into the sacred corner where Asobo-Ntsi's throne was placed. He groped in the dark and his hands felt what he wanted. For a moment he was gripped by fear and it was as if a force was pulling him off his weak limbs. He was breathing heavily, panting in subdued gusts of exhaustion, as his hands gripped the very symbol of his authority and disgrace. It was the huge elephant tusk, Ngwäre -tom that had made him and his people exiles in the land for so long. Now it was about to be ushered into its own true shrine where it belonged, and where the Gods dance in jubilation that Nnkaa had found herself at last. In that brief moment Awa-nkaa saw the rugged past of his people hanging on his closed eyelids, the long nomadic days across hills, rivers and forests; periods of enslavement under repressive Chiefs requesting allegiance; the recalcitrant postures of Nnkaa thereafter, rejecting and seeking passage across even more insidious territory, all in the hope of finding a home for Ngwäre -tom. Then Tenghehfeng offered them the embrace of a brother that was too much for their starved memory. They had found home at last, and the story was to be told from one generation to the other, of how Nnkaa sat in council and

steered the affairs of Nyen, divided the spoils after conquest, and reconciled estranged spirits. But a shadow was cast over the land at noon through regency conspiracies and culminated in the process which ensured that Asobo-Ntsi suddenly became mad; and it was a madness that could not be cured, targeting Nnkaa, and encouraging other families to do same. The story was to be told again of how Nnkaa was again slipping into a new horror in a land where they had learned how to love and be loved. But it was a story that was never to end because Nnkaa could now say no and proffer her fist in a wrestling arena.

It was the shadow of a thought that passed over Awa-nkaa, recalling an immanent past that had been weaved into an evening tale from mother to child, as he squatted besides the heavy burden. He lifted it, for no one else could, and felt his limbs tremble again as he whispered the incantation of appeasement and of reconciliation, the promise of a resolution never to part with the pathfinder again, the throaty terror against bellicose hearts and who stroke fear into aggressive hearts. For Ngwäre -tom was a God and a staff and both the people of Nnkaa and Nyen as a whole had been exposed in his 'absence' and misuse. Now he was coming back home, into the warmth he had sought and protected, terror of aggressors, fed with living hearts of men!

He turned and the others, waiting, helped him and slung Ngwäre-tom over their shoulders and silently made their exit. It was justice that they sought, and if the Gods were not in agreement, they would not have succeeded. Awa-nkaa was relieved, at last, for who else could have done this for Nnkaa if he were not the one? He led them into Nyen and who else could have taken them out when staying was no longer possible? Only once had Ngwäre -tom been moved in the past, that was when Tipah threatened Nyen and he and Piezouh were not yet strange to each other.

Apart from Awa-nkaa, each of the men hurled along a piece of royal sacredness, the regalia that was to enthrone the new Nnkaa. Awa-nkaa was whispering again, urging them to hurry on, even without him, and hide their burden before dawn. If it were necessary they would have to make several trips to the palace again, to invest Nnkaa of her glory.

Chapter Eighteen

Where was the bard, when the story reached crisis point? Footpaths suddenly overgrown with fear; and children were to listen to their fathers confess no knowledge of that they were never witness to. Where was the bard, when the story needed a mekwire?

It was the chilly morning more than the early morning birds that awoke the new occupants of Asobo-Ntsi's palace. Not that the cold irritated them; in fact, in comparison to the rocky heights of the colonial fort, the palace was almost soothing in its chilliness that rose out of the banks of the Qwang. Chamfa stirred in bed and was immediately alert to the task of the day; he knew Scott would be expecting concrete results that should justify the unauthorised night out of station. While he had never formally given them the impression that such extravagance was warranted, Scott had never reprimanded his soldiers for staying in the field beyond their allotted time, and was instead more interested in the results which for the most part were positive. Chamfa knew that if things moved on without a hitch they should be back in the camp by sunset.

He got out of bed and called out to his subordinates. They were already up and gathered around a large fire, and were roasting cocoyams, which they generously dipped into glittering honey from Asobo-Ntsi's store. It was an early breakfast such as they hardly had in the barracks. They were unusually excited and chatty, and Awa-Meshi was already an intimate part of the group, cracking jokes in broken Mungakaa. The phrases fell out of his lips with a heavy clumsiness, as he chewed and sucked his fingers. He would switch into Pidgin English, to impress the group, recalling stories of his adventurous contacts with the white man in Victoria. He was setting the pace for the conversation and it was obvious, by the time Chamfa got up, that he would not let the others say anything else.

They greeted Chamfa with an informal civility that often characterised their stay abroad, on assignment, when the bonds of brotherhood overcame the show of profession. They either called

Chamfa then Ni or Baa, and it pleased him too, to be reminded of his real self with his own people. Like the rest of the colonial staff, he too was often impatient with the cloak of a culture they were forced to accept and believe in but always revolving on the fringes, never allowed to peep into its mystery. But it was satisfactory too, the sheer exuberance of walking besides Nwuoubang and of being sent on errands by him, and then to be received with sumptuous ceremony by the Fons of the various villages under Scott's jurisdiction. Some of the Fons even mistook him for a special friend of the white man, and chided themselves and their people for having been so blind in the beginning.

The men were ready in a short while, and even then Awa-Meshi still did not know what was expected of him. All he knew was that he was going to assist the soldiers in some activity that would probably put Nyen in the good books of Nwuoupang. Two of the guards were to remain behind to make sure no stray fellows entered the palace in their absence. Already, a few men, obviously spies, were seen lingering around the palace entrance, pretending to be going somewhere, only to retrace their feet and then repeat the pattern in an apparently unending procession.

They arrived the Qwang fall when the sun was already spraying the lower valley of Loup, and a gentle film of vapour was rising from the dew-showered earth. When they emerged from the clearing near the pool, Chamfa cleared his voice and the soldier seemed to jump into the body that up till then was passively convivial. He briefed Awa-Meshi of what Nwuoubang expected of him, so that by sunset, that day, Asobo-Ntsi should be allowed to return home. One had to be tactical, Chamfa told himself, otherwise these natives would always side with their savage Chiefs. Awa-Meshi nodded eagerly especially with the reference to Nwuoupang.

Chamfa had figured out everything before getting out of bed, and had fetched a thick rope from what was evidently Asobo-Ntsi's packing room, and firmly looped this around Awa-Meshi's waist. Then it was firmly tethered to the trunk of the nearest tree, and the men had to hold it just for additional precaution, and for proper direction. Awa-Meshi had completely undressed himself except for an old pair of baggy khaki shorts, which he had beneath a worn out pair of khaki trousers.

He tried the water from the edge of the pool with the left

foot, and watching him from his distance, chewing his tobacco, Chamfa shrugged; people are always suited for their jobs, he has often told himself in comparison to the menial occupations assigned him and his kind by Scott, and now he also realised that there must be someone to fish out the evidence against Asobo-Ntsi from the womb of the cold waters. He knew the same thought was running through the minds of his men, as they watched, shuddering, and then cautioned and encouraged Awa-Meshi with the appearance of people who saw no danger in wadding into a pool of water and out again with what they wanted.

Awa-Meshi plunged into the pool and for a moment was shocked by the stabbing chilliness of contact with his flesh, but then he had been in colder spots with even lesser prospects of reward and recognition. He spread out his legs and arms in rhythmic moves, kicking and shooting forward against the rough currents, and negotiated his way by the banks of the pool, aware that the tide was strongest toward the centre. For a while he resurfaced and lingered on the surface of the pool and then disappeared again with a sharp swash and the soldiers were momentarily taken aback as the cord slipped through their fingers. Then there was a taut, reassuring them. Awa-Meshi's head popped up after a while for breath and then disappeared again and this time the stay beneath water was longer. He resurfaced again and squeezed water from his eyes with his right hand, the other hand holding onto some clumps by the bank, before diving back. Chamfa was already feeling disappointed; he had foreseen a situation where the man would pop out with a skull or two each time he surfaced, and imagined a trip back to Scott laden with a scary spectre.

After two more fruitless resurfacings Awa-Meshi emerged unexpectedly from the southern part of the pool with a skull strapped to the extra length of the cord around his waist. Some of the men screamed in terror, falling back, and ashamed at the same time of their unmanly attitude.

Awa-Meshi was already shivering fitfully by the time the skull dropped from his waist but insisted on going in again for a second skull he had spotted near the one he just brought out. Chamfa again shrugged, thankful that he was where he was. He was surveying the skull unaware that Awa-Meshi had already dived back into the pool. The sockets were filled with earth but the teeth were still in place,

standing apart as if a wedge had been driven between them. This was certainly going to please Scott, Chamfa reflected, turning it all over with his boot, and marvelling at the extent of cruelty that can push a man to such acts.

There was another cry from his men, this time more welcoming, and when Chamfa looked up Awa-Meshi was struggling up the muddy bank with a second skull. He did not have to wait for a third skull to establish the guilt of Asobo-Ntsi. His immediate concern was the health of Awa-Meshi, who was shivering like a leaf in a storm, dripping all over. He was draped in one of the thick blankets that the soldiers always went on mission with, just in case they had to spend the night in unusual circumstances. Awa-Meshi's teeth clattered violently as the men made their way up the steep slope into the welcome sun, but he was not regretting. After all, the men were showering praises on him, and it was clear that the same emotion would accompany their reports to Nwuoupang. Even more than this, Awa-Meshi was pleased with himself for having decided on what to do while in the pool. He understood the cunning of Nwuoupang, and knew that he could not send his men all the way from Atisong to come and fetch skulls with Nnkaa men without intending to do harm to Asobo-Ntsi. Immediately he saw Mornkaa and Ngyim, Awa-Meshi knew there was foul play in the matter but decided not to act in a way that would betray his fear. So while he sought to please Nwuoupang he also knew that his first duty was to protect Asobo-Ntsi against whatever stories Nnkaa would have made against him. He therefore spent his time beneath water searching for the fresh skulls and pushing them further into the stronger current, just in case Nwuoupang's men decided to bring in a second person to search or to jump in themselves.

Asobo-Ntsi did not sleep the whole night. He knew things were not the way they should be and would perhaps never be the same again. He had a strong presentiment of something he could not describe, and so spent the whole night thinking and waiting for dawn to crawl down from the chilly heights so as to put his plans in place. His men snored in their sleep in the next room and Asobo-Ntsi again envied them for the ease with which they went through the matters of daily

life. He chewed kola and then smoked, applying fire to his smaller pipe, having decided long ago not to task Cho-Muluh beyond respectable time at night.

But something was wrong. There was a laxity in the attention paid him this time and Scott seemed to ignore the negligence. Often, Scott would see to it that servants attended to Asobo-Ntsi in every conceivable manner, and even take him on a tour of the Fort from where, on the edge of the hanging cliff, they could see the expanse of territory, which, Scott boasted, he was out to redeem. Then in the evenings, Asobo-Ntsi would be invited to a traditional drink with his host, over which they elaborated their plans of governance, assistance and surveillance, as Scott phrased his diplomacy, dutifully translated by Tamenji. He knew the translator was having a difficult time at linking the two men through whom the respective cultures converged, but then Scott had long convinced himself that such hitches were to be expected, and was satisfied that, after all, his basic frame of mind was established and should accepted as such. It was authority that had to edge into the conclaves of unreclaimed territory with gradual patience and mastered ingenuity in order to redeem the blot of humanity so cursed since Ham. And he was succeeding, and sought to establish a thesis in his reports based on the rekindled partnership with native 'leadership' as a precursor to the ultimate goal of His Majesty's vision. And how shall they not be thankful to our untiring and selfless sacrifice for the good of all mankind?

Asobo-Ntsi pondered on the lapses now observed in the disregard for his person. He was even more worried that Nwuoupang's men had spent the night in Nyen. Uncertainty made Asobo-Ntsi regret for once his habit of travelling with his entire entourage. There was no one left behind to take initiative in the event of an emergency for Mafor was after all only a woman. He therefore resolved to send Sa'amontoh to Nyen in the morning, to bring him news about the state of affairs as soon as possible. If it were necessary he would leave Atisong even without the knowledge of Nwuoupang.

He was no longer interested in the scheduled classes. He had not journeyed all the way to Atisong for that, and would instead send word to Nwuoupang about his impatience to talk with him. Otherwise he must return to Nyen as soon as possible to look after his people.

Chamfa could see people appearing and disappearing at the distance, evidently trying to locate their whereabouts, and discover what they were out for. They were surely communicating through some traditional methods best known to them, which he and his people would mistake for normal bush noises, but then their business in Nyen was not to harass the people. The evidence they had collected was more than rewarding and there was no reason to delay again in Nyen.

The people sneaked out of the bushes on the heels of the departing soldiers. They were not really sure of Nwuoupang's plans, but already, they knew that Nwuoupang did not mean well for Nyen. The fact that Ngyim and Mornkaa accompanied the soldiers was proof of conspiracy against Asobo-Ntsi. So only the men came out; the women and children still remained in hiding, awaiting a signal from the men.

Gathered around the palace entrance the men discussed the possibilities of tackling Nwuoupang and Nnkaa, as they now saw the situation, should they return. They did not put up a fight the first time because they were not sure of Asobo-Ntsi's state and opinion.

'We would only fight if Asobo-Ntsi says so,' Tadtipong said, stating the general opinion. 'But we do not even know where he is right now, and whether or not he is eating and drinking and smoking.'

Everybody agreed. They must not act like the people of Tad who took to beating Nwuoupang's messenger only to learn later on that their Fon was actually in Atisong with Nwuoupang waiting for the messenger to return with information about the construction of a house for Nwuoupang's God. People laughed in Nyen and said it was because the people of Tad poured too much palm oil into their heads. Any foolish act on their part now will make the people of Tad to laugh at them too, that they had too much raffia in their heads.

Sa'amontoh was cutting across the Afoune ridge when, from the distance, he caught the glint from the steel on the helmet of Nwuoupang's men. He slowed down mechanically, his eyes fixed on the approaching group. It was clear they had not yet seen him and instinct made him to slip into the bush. For some reason his heart was beating and he knew it was not for nothing. It was what he had encountered so many times when, during the Fon's hunt for instance, he would feel his head suddenly grow bigger; then he knew he was in the neighbourhood of unearthly creatures, mostly unfriendly and yet harmless if left alone. He positioned himself behind some clumps that stood in the brown expanse like a landmark, and monitored the men as they approached, talking excitedly to one another. They bore huge bags and Sa'amontoh's initial conclusion was that they had looted the palace. The men could not have spent a night in Nyen and what was more, in the absence of Asobo-Ntsi, if they did not want the Fon's head. Only Asobo-Ntsi was too confident of his strength, and of his relationship with Nwuoupang. Last night they had tried in vain to make him see otherwise, and in desperation had crawled into the hard beds that had been provided for them in the guards' quarter. But now, Sa'amontoh knew from instinctive habit that all was not well and may never be well again.

The men were closer now and he could catch bits of their conversation. But it offered no clues, as two of them were recalling their escapades during a wedding in Tipah just when they were called up to join Nwuoupang.

They passed by, wild and sweating with recollected excitement, which had to be summoned, once in a while, to compensate for the drudgery of their present task with Nwuoubang. That was what they loved, Sa'amontoh reflected bitterly, biting his lip to suppress the agitation in his heart, and again stumbled back into the dusty track, burdened with the miseries of Asobo-Ntsi and all of Nyen. Asobo-Ntsi trusted his oily tongue and said that when it came to settling disputes, Sa'amontoh's words were only second to those of Ndiyzé. Sa'amontoh's pride could not be contained as every task he was charged with was always executed without flaws. But now

uncertainty attended his zeal, as he reduced the distance between him and the palace, breathing heavily.

As he scaled the slope into the Mitanyen junction, wearied cries of mixed emotions greeted him from the bushes and presently men dressed for battle leapt out of the bushes and saluted Sa'amontoh with such supplication that his heart stood still for a while.

'Where is the lion of the land?' one cried, almost prostrate before Sa'amontoh.

'O, Sa'amontoh! Tipah has rubbed shit on Asobo-Ntsi's cap!'

'Not yet, and never!' another cried.

They were emerging from the bushes into the market clearance while they hailed Sa'amontoh toward the palace. Dressed in skirts of fibred fronds stringed around their waists and falling in a wavy flair around their ankles, they men looked more like ancestral masks. Their chests were bare, strapped with amulets and charms from private or family shrines. Sa'amontoh felt their woes weighing down on his shoulders, and knew that he had to give them assurance; that was what they needed, even if he were to deceive them. How could he tell them that at that very moment uncertainty attained their Fon in the palace of Nwuoupang? They would weep and then cry out for war against Nwuoupang and even without a leader would plunge themselves into certain death.

Sa'amontoh was talking to the small group of warriors in general, but his specific words were intended for the ears of their leaders. He even cracked jokes, made light of the situation, trying to understand too the extent to which the village had been shaken by Nwuoupang's men. He assured them that Asobo-Ntsi was well, in the company of Nwuoupang and should be back with them by tomorrow sunset. But he saw disbelief on their faces, even in the excitement of the new intelligence, hooded by a streak of humiliation that could only be appeased, Sa'amontoh knew, by the immediate return of Asobo-Ntsi and of appropriate action against the traitors of Nnkaa and Tipah.

They also informed him of the contingent plans that had been executed following Moussa's return to the village and assured him, as he wished to know, that the royal family was safe. Sa'amontoh smiled at last reflecting on the irony of the carrier's actions which, without understanding as he, Sa'amontoh now did,

Asobo-Ntsi had vowed to punish.

Scott was pinching his brain and tickling his mind for appropriate phrase and scribbling his thoughts as they rushed to mind, not caring for the moment about consistency. His bosses needed some form of reprieve to their conscience that would extend the legacy of Wilberforce, when the readers at home flipped through the pages of the primitive accounts, not only to be fascinated but also to be enticed into further dreams of travel and adventure. He scratched out what came to him as in a flash, and awaited the moment when he will have to edit his own words in anticipation of necessary preferment and with the luxury of a confident chap, as his father-in-law will put it, and admitting insistent stubbornness and discarding stray wantonness. His own phrases rushed back to him as he wrote on, amused with his play on word and phrase in silent estimation and recognition of the maturity of his style.

For that was what disturbed the Editors of The Colonial Gazette whenever they wrote back for clarification from Scott over 'a stray phrase in lousy juxtaposition with, if you don't mind ...' And Scott smiled to himself, dismissing what he himself called a self-destroying fancy in him to tax and challenge his superiors too much. But he was the man in the field, and better placed to authenticate the ideal that could only be estimated by those who documented every pulse he communicated from the ground into a testament for the glory of the King. He may not be a law maker, but he was the one to implement in in this forsaken hideout and that made his position and vision unchallengeable.

They could not do otherwise but learn to accept him and his style, Scott decided, biting off another phrase about the 'sarcastic nonchalance of this traditional harlequin dreaming of parallel authority with our sceptred Crown!' That was the concluding mood he loved most, rounding off his articles in a personal chauvinism that was insulting and victorious at the same time in its conceited assumptions. For, he was engaged in battle with his superiors, crying out against the desire in them to quarter him into a passive recorder of the colonial mischief with no particular emotion attached to his evidence. It was left for them, perched on the slopes of the Chariot

of the Gods to determine emotional impacts in terms of ideological profit and loss. So he craved this duel then, which usually tickled and inflamed the conservative imagination of his superiors like nothing else from the colonial wasteland. But he also experienced a pain, Scott admitted, now sketching one of his favourite native chiefs in such deprecating phrases, and felt like a traitor to the groomed friendship of Asobo-Ntsi. But there were limits to sentimentality when one had to bargain personal integrity as a barometer to the dominance of the Crown with pampered mentalities still learning to emerge, if at all, from the realm of nonentity. An Augustan scholar by birth, he had stumbled on Hardy by accident and found the Wessex resurrectionist charming to his own developing demons. Distancing himself from the spurious sentimentality that the writer celebrated in his anti-progressive way, Scott however clung to a phrase from Henchard's nightmares about fetishistic byways which he believed the writer only imagined like the rest of his metropolitan colonisers. Now that he was in the very heart of the atavistic vision, and was sniffing the incense of primitivism, how was he to pretend indifference at the threat from chiefs who personify the fetish?

He quickly read over the manuscript, blotting out and inserting, dipping his pen into ink with the grudging look of a man who had faith in his own words and watched them emerge on paper from the very foundations of his convictions, not to be challenged. He was thinking of the line of white apes under whose watery gaze his article had to be subjected. They were certain to groan over his very title, so well thought out that it pained Scott to think that someone could even suggest the slightest alteration. 'Baptized Savagery' was his initial and concrete thought, unchangeable and he went on to describe Asobo-Ntsi, after verifiable intelligence reports from the field as the very embodiment of that cold and uncreated instinct in His Majesty's holy dominion that is an affront and embarrassment to the redeeming hand. Yet they were sure to suggest such horrible 'modifications' beginning in Buea, then Lagos and finally London from where, by the time the article returned to him in beautiful print, the only recognizable relationship he shared with it would be his name tagged at the bottom of the page almost grudgingly. Glory may rise from the roots of native savagery, but honour never returned again to the roots, always usurped by those who dreaded the hinterlands like a plague. So the words that once

were his, from the roots of his soul, would stare at him from strange horizons, having been mutilated into convenient phrases for the establishment. He had one consolation, though, that his description of the administered drug as 'sassafras poison' was the most ingenious approximation of the unknown, having telegraphed messages to Buea for a better alternative to no avail. Yet, there was a need for His Majesty's tongue to still encode even the unknown.

He sighed as he folded the pages into a large brown envelope that was to be transmitted to Buea the following day by his carrier. He himself was feeling enclaved in this distant periphery of London's vision and had resigned himself to the fact. The telegraph was down but it did not bother him because he had to resort to early explorers' notes and their traditional messenger-communication footnoted elaborately in every pre-departure package. It took almost an eternity for a messenger to take a message to Buea and back, but here, he also concluded, even eternity became a habitual part of one's consciousness.

Chapter Nineteen

And History has many voices, those who remember and those no longer remember.

The record of a people, in a moment of victory, becomes the voice of God, and why doubt when you are faceless and voiceless, everything a contingent 'lessness' or the reverse, against you.

He was breathing woes of Lawino, and summoning them at the same time as witness to the fruits of his mind, but who was there for audience, when every truth was now a virtual fact, at the click of the button and confirmed, or not found like the voice of the old man had been passing out gradually opposite him, in the sophisticated databases of the Empire's glory, and so a confirmed void and without name?

But the burden of Memory hanging from his nip or his finger tips, and the keyboard was to become lone witness to vagrant years and thoughts, recalled from withered lips, when ancestral command was too assertive to ignore.

And the old man had only desired a living totem at the expiry moment of parturition, for the story never dies...

Asobo-Ntsi was sitting on the edge of the rock, hanging over the precarious brink like a dry elephant grass stalk, frail and tired. His right elbow strayed onto his knee in a resting posture, and he wedged his head in his upturned palm. He was curled up on the rock in the misery of his situation, observing his people in the pit breaking stones. That was the task Nwuoupang had finally reserved for him and his people, ever since he refused to give up Ti-Ndoh. And who expected him to eat after that, he Asobo-Ntsi, in detention and humiliated even by children who in normal circumstances could not be his pipe-carriers? He, a man of his will, now expected to submit to another's estimation of what should be and how! Away from his

people and forced to sit on raw earth, Asobo-Ntsi knew his death was near; either he fought with all his bravery, or return home disgraced and unable to be respected by the people of Nyen. That would also mean victory for Nnkaa who were now, he heard, erecting their own village, having stolen his royal regalia.

He watched his men, now reduced to stonebreakers, as they dug into the barren red earth and heaved out the long black stones, which they then shattered into portable boulders for easy transportation to the Fort. The rubble was mounting daily, as the men gave themselves to the task, forgetting what it was like to be free. Even Tamenji was amazed at the hardiness of the men from Nyen, and often gaped at them doing their task with ease, almost enjoying it. But he knew too that they hated him in their hearts, and dreaded their black eyes lingering on him without seeing, clouded by dust rising from the shattered stones.

Asobo-Ntsi spat out tobacco chaff that he had been chewing now for two days. His stock was out, and Tamenji would not allow an agile hand like Cho-Muluh's serve the Fon with his smoke. Asobo-Ntsi reflected on this as he watched the people in the pit, their muscles bulging out as they dug and heaved, groaned and hurled, and blamed himself for their lot. He had fed live thunder against his own people and now it was tearing all his hopes apart, and cuddled on the boulder he knew Nyen would never be same again, after this. He had a feeling that he would never see the land again, and shuddered at the thought of ruling a people who will no longer respect him, even if he were ever to return. With Nnkaa now settled on the Ndanshi plains, as Sa'amontoh reported to him, he saw nothing but his land falling asunder, everyone claiming the right to be on his own and he, Asobo-Ntsi, would be the remnant of insignificance. For a moment he even doubted the loyalty of Ndiyzé.

So he had decided not to eat. A bit of palm wine during the day and tobacco, and then his pipe at night was all he consumed now. He looked haggard, his heavy moustache hanging over his pale lips like a forgotten piece of fallowed land. He had even threatened to join his Notables in the pit and even Tamenji was taken aback by this gesture, and his people had to supplicate on their knees before Asobo-Ntsi with a heavy heart regained his rock-spot, and leaned back against his own broken will. And every morning before work began he watched Sa'amontoh hand over a bundle of rusted shillings

to Tamenji, to buy off their Fon from the humiliation of breaking stones. And the Tipahman would snatch the bundle and as quickly, slip it into his pocket, giving his wild orders at the same time.

At dusk everyday, they clogged back to the Fort, chained in pairs that made the trip up the slope a terrible burden. They were allowed a brief moment of freedom to wash the dust off their feet, reminding them of mornings in the village after returning from tapping. Then they were herded into the cell with small plank beds, each for the pair. The chains were now replaced by neck-rings, again paired, and the clanging sound was death itself.

Tamenji kept an Empire calendar in his office, and had planted crooked ticks all over its surface, just so he didn't slip out on an appointment, personal or professional. But every Wednesday evening he always forgot to pair up Sa'amontoh, a blunder that permitted the Nyenman to be busy all night scaling hills and sneaking through the valleys, his robust limbs urged into a kinship that he was being forced to forget, serving his Fon and enjoying the task. He had to contact all the rich men in Nyen and the other Fons to supplement Asobo-Ntsi's meagre coffers that must take care of Tamenji's ever rising demands. That was also when he brought back the few delicacies like tobacco, boiled and dried akob, sweet potato chips that looked clumsy after the sun-baking, and kolanuts on which Asobo-Ntsi survived. On his calendar Tamenji marked off this benevolence with the words, 'Samontoh chained,' crafting them in a pinched, Old English hand that was one glaring evidence of his services to the King of England.

At night Cho-Muluh was the servant for everybody, since he could remove his steel necklace and skip about taking orders and serving whoever was in need. He was given every pet name possible, and he was flattered too. In his own little imagination he knew he too was saving Nyen from extinction as they all had vowed to do, sanctioned into oath by Asobo-Ntsi himself.

'Who should remain to tell the children,' Ndiyzé had asked one evening during their detention, as they prepared for bed and discussed their woes with habitual familiarity, 'if we should all give up?'

Following the return of Chamfa's team from Nyen, it was clear that the incriminating evidence against Asobo-Ntsi was enough to justify the act of the Law pursuing its course. There was an urgent

summons for Asobo-Ntsi to appear before His Majesty's court the following day and after the briefest of trials, which even forced Tamenji to stagger mentally, unable to draw any parallel in recent memory, Asobo-Ntsi's acknowledgement of guilt was considered the admission of a foregone conclusion, only necessary to keep the records straight.

Listening to Ndiyzé now and thinking about posterity, Asobo-Ntsi knew he had acted correctly. He smiled from his makeshift prison throne, recalling the moments when he stood against all of Nyen in order to ensure that the story should never end. The story was like the road wriggling both way and the people only had to pick up the trail and follow, he had reminded his people. Every byway merges somewhere ahead into the bigger road, and the people only had to be resolute and never give up.

As the men chatted, reclined against the hardness of the mud walls and expressed themselves in low, drawling tones, no longer angry, there was a clanging at the prison door. The heavy locks were being manipulated and presently Tamenji came in attended by four sturdy guards. He addressed Asobo-Ntsi in Mungakaa. The verdict of his case had arrived from Buea, and Nwuoupang sent him to inform Asobo-Ntsi. The case had been decided against him, on three counts. Nwuoupang therefore wished to know if Asobo-Ntsi was now ready to surrender the recalcitrant priest who administered the poison against the people of Nyen?

The fury that had been compressed in Asobo-Ntsi's heart suddenly found vent against the messenger.

'Tell Nwuoupang from me, Tamenji,' Asobo-Ntsi fumed, 'that I never eat the shit of a Tewirikum woman because of her calabash of oil!'

And once again he reclined into stiffness, the corners of his mouth working nervously in awkward moves, causing his moustache to tremble. Tamenji shook his head in ironic sympathy and signalled to his men. If any foolish man thought he could climb the tree with his buttocks against Scott Brown, personal representative of the King of England, that was entirely his business.

After they had departed Asobo-Ntsi again rallied his men around him and in soft but heavy words, again dared any of them to betray his Fon to Nwuoupang! Ti-Ndoh was only serving him, Asobo-Ntsi, and the people of Nyen showed their gratitude to him.

Why should he be sacrificed now?

'Anyone who opened his mouth against my priest will be the one to be hanged by Nwuoupang,' he barked dryly, a subdued quiver in his voice. Ti-Ndoh was only a messenger of the Gods through Asobo-Ntsi and anyone who laid a hand against him sought to break the will of the Gods themselves.

'But let us consider, Tsa-apifor,' Ndiyzé ventured, 'that Ti-Ndoh is only one man while Asobo-Ntsi is a whole people. Nyen can do without Ti-Ndoh, but can never do without Asobo-Ntsi.'

He heard the usual verve still in his voice knocking at the doors of Asobo-Ntsi's resistance, but unable to say whether or not the Fon will submit. He had vowed that Ti-Ndoh was only his own arm, stretched out in the service of Nyen, and how could he, the roof on every head, abandon him at noon? Not even he, Asobo-Ntsi, could perform the sacred rites to which Ti-Ndoh was burdened. Ndiyzé had understood, and so too the other notables, but then it was a bargain either for Asobo-Ntsi's head or the sacrifice of Ti-Ndoh as for the people of Nyen the decision was not debatable. Even a royal slave dies willingly for his Fon.

'Nwuoupang wants my neck,' Asobo-Ntsi said, 'and that is what he will get. He no longer trust me and will be glad to see me die.'

Then he got up slowly from his stool in a new gesture of dismissal he had cultivated in jail, and walked to the barred door and held the rails, with the vengeful instinct that had built in his heart. The talk too had to be dropped, and the men, gathered in the enclosed stone building, listened to the beatings of their own hearts transmitting their own misery far away from home.

There was to be no work for the prisoners that day. Tamenji had told them so the week before, that in fact Scott was to throw a little party to show the prisoners that he had no ill feelings against them. It was an important day in his own country, and he wanted to share his joy with the people. Tamenji had even been teaching the prison choir a new song to be performed for the pleasure of Scott's guests. The few semi-literate prisoners in the group were pleased with this arrangement which spared them the harsh labour for a few hours

every day, so long as they proved to Tamenji that they had nimble brains which could parrot 'Remember, Remember Empire Day' within the limited time. So instead of work on this penultimate day, the prisoners were to tidy their surroundings, clean the cell, wash their remnant dresses and continue with their religious lessons. The guards were to come round with sliced pieces of soap. This excited the old men; they had often envied Asobo-Ntsi's clean clothes, compared with their rags that were faded out by the repeated use of the foaming leaf. The men were relaxed and expectant. There was a rumour that Nwuoupang had invited some of his friends to feast with him, and may even make a gesture toward Asobo-Ntsi.

As the men made sure that every blade of grass around the Fort premises was weeded off the paved yard, Asobo-Ntsi reclined in a corner and picked his teeth with a blade of grass, counting his own thoughts as the grass passed in between his teeth.

Then suddenly there was a flurry in the yard. A brief rolling of drums was followed by a trumpet sound that issued from the outer Fort in the guards' quarter, and a man of enormous size, dressed in royal colours, entered the prison gates. The Notables of Asobo-Ntsi closest to the stranger bowed nervously and clustered together in revered attention. As they ululated with husky voices, Cho-Muluh darted into the cell to alert Asobo-Ntsi about the arrival of the Fon of Meyiu, majestically proud in his bearing. It was like an apparition, to have such a presence, and so unexpected, that they were almost unprepared for the ceremonial conquest of the moment. Asobo-Ntsi looked at the other man and knew that the crippling misery of abandoned faith was only a momentary shadow over his heart that was to pass too like the days and nights of his misery, into a new day. The optimistic feeling had always been with him and his men and he now wondered how they were almost lured into surrendering, when in their souls, after the stingy evening meals and the drudgery of Tamnji's next day itinerary, they felt a weakness of spirit that could not be described; a feeling that something unknown was either leaving them or installing itself in their hearts, and in the absence or presence was a great vacuum of unnameable loss. They had moved about and talked and even laughed when they could not do otherwise, and still the emptying feeling remained, reminding them as nothing else could that they were, in the words of Ndiyzé, dancing the Mandere backwards, retreating. How could they feel responsibly

proud any more when their shrines were abandoned, their homesteads invaded by snakes, and their wives and children crying for protection in vain?

But now as they clustered into the room after the sudden apparition of glorious memory, they felt renewed strength in things that held them together, things they did not understand and did not care, but knew that these provided the anchor to their very existence.

As they bowed and hooted in reverence, Asobo-Ntsi, rising from his stool, smiled, a sudden glimmer, almost strangely, on his crusty face. His men noticed the change and felt like weeping over their woes, which Asobo-Ntsi shouldered alone.

‘Ah!’ he thundered in jubilation, unconscious of his environment, ‘I knew that the Tiger of Meyiu was soon to show its head!’ He had advanced toward the Fon and they embraced like twins separated at birth.

‘Welcome to my new palace!’ Asobo-Ntsi said. Even in his ecstasy the irony of his words brought a sob to his voice, and he clenched his fist in reaction to the momentary emotion, returning the imagined machete-salute of Ndei-Meyiu.

Whenever the two men sat together, whether for important issues concerning their two villages or for a usual fraternal visit, their conversation dragged into the night, spiced with palm wine, kola, and tobacco after the more formal feasting. Their parents had been great rulers and friends in their time, and had sworn a brotherhood that time could never sever. They had agreed to rule their respective dominions, but that no fig tree should mark the boundary between the two entities. They were children of the same family, they agreed, only that they must obey the laws of age and live in separate homes and bring up their own children. So they had agreed to get up, each from his palace, at the first cockcrow, and move towards the other. The spot where they met was to become the dividing line between the two villages, and should also serve as a common market for their peoples. Asobo-Ntsi’s father had set out with an entourage of four, and talking and chewing, they were beyond Saa-Ntah before they espied the flickering light from the bamboo torches from the Meyiu delegation.

Asobo-Ntsi and his friend never tire of recalling this and other stories, as a reminder that their bond of brotherhood was never to be broken. Then they would cast lobes of kolanuts and

contemplate the worries of their ancestors. Assured of the future, they drank and laughed.

Ndei-Meyiu was apologising for not coming sooner to see his friend. But he had to be given permission to do so by Nwuoupang who had been to his palace twice since the detention of Asobo-Ntsi, following a similar confrontation with witches in Meyiu.

‘Ahaa!’ Asobo-Ntsi said, turning to his Notables, ‘do you hear!’ His eyes were bright again with restrained emotion. Sa’amontoh had hinted him of something in that direction but he had been too distracted and only now remembered the poor man’s pleas for him to do as the people of Meyiu. ‘Ndei-Meyiu has challenged Nwuoupang and can still walk right into his compound,’ he went on, ‘but you all want me to go and beg him and eat his shit. You can only fight and win Nwuoupang with a strong heart, if you do not want to be a slave to Tipah!’

Ndei-Meyiu was visibly uneasy, watching his friend recoil away from himself, stubbornly insisting on the fact that he was not mad, and that it was instead Nwuoupang who was mad to think that he, Asobo-Ntsi, could betray a faithful priest like Ti-Ndoh! Ndei-Meyiu had to calm him down, and talked in softer tones, trying to be humorous, but often he laughed alone, confronting the stiff lips of the other. But he did not give up, knowing the celebrated stubbornness of his friend. The people of Nyen had suffered enough, he said, and it was time the lion returned home and look after the homestead. The best way to confront Nwuoupang’s threatening fist was to stretch out a hand of friendship, and fool him into thinking that it was really friendship that one offered and accepted.

‘Then after that, what?’ Asobo-Ntsi said, ‘if he still insists on hitting you as he is hitting me and my people?’

Ndei-Meyiu did not have a ready answer for that and knew that some how his friend was right. He was already despising his own compromise at a moment when he could have stood up against Nwuoupang, but then he did not have to think only of himself and his throne. He tried to pass this on to Asobo-Ntsi in a roundabout way, that he had to give up three healthy slaves as victims of his priest’s sins against Nwuoupang’s laws, and therefore saved his land and people from the misery and uncertainty of his absence. Asobo-Ntsi felt the pinch in the reference to Nnkaa’s rebellion against him, but decided not to react. It seemed to him that he was the only

person who could understand his own logic against Nwuoupang whom he once took for a friend. Perhaps, also, that was why he took it so personally. No, he affirmed his position to Ndei-Meyiu, he would not listen to supplications on behalf of Nwuoupang, as long as he was still in detention, and would never betray Ti-Ndoh even for his own freedom.

Ndei-Meyiu had difficulty swallowing his wine; but he was also thinking of where he was to go after leaving Asobo-Ntsi. He had been invited with other Fons and Chiefs, to come and feast with Nwuoupang. And so he laughed when he had to, without emotion, knowing that he had failed in his mission to dissuade Asobo-Ntsi from his stubborn stance. So he will continue to send food to Nyen, provide shelter for those whose homes were destroyed in kin-vengeance, and still hope that his friend will come to reason. He could also imagine the disappointment of the other Fons whose emissary he was to Asobo-Ntsi, with instructions to give up Ti-Ndoh, or sacrifice slaves as some of them had done. But Asobo-Ntsi had said they were giving in too easily to Nwuoupang, allowing a stranger to come and cut the string that held them together.

‘Who will then perform the duties of your slaves?’ he asked.

Ndei-Meyiu opened his mouth but no word came. Nwuoupang had ruled against any more tribal wars, and with that hopes of capturing more slaves diminished. But then, he consoled himself, there was always a possibility of capturing a few more slaves without Nwuoupang’s knowledge.

Evening was descending on the frosty knolls and even Asobo-Ntsi, hardened by adversity, was shivering slightly. But it was also refreshing in a way, making him to think again about his life when it was fresh, and the possibilities being offered him. Tamenji had called him a fool after the departure of Ndei-Meyiu, for refusing to behave like the other Chiefs. Asobo-Ntsi pondered over his decision for long, alone in his corner, and deaf to the chatting of his men who had wished to join the other prisoners in Nwuoupang’s festivities. But Asobo-Ntsi had looked at them, one stern look of annihilation, and they knew what not to do. So they instead drew apart, as Asobo-Ntsi withdrew into his thoughts; they were already used to the situation

and did not care about the uncertainties that came with each day. Then as the sun was disappearing behind the very distant hills, the men had gone for their classes with Tamenji's assistants. That at least provided diversion in the evenings after their return to the cell, as each tried to recall a word and the other the meaning. They were laughing at themselves in order to escape from the humiliation; the sheer effort to lurch over the letters of the alphabet in the hope of one day realising their own names from the scatchy wonder without assistance. But if this was Asobo-Ntsi's conclusion, locked up in his thoughts and refusing to relate, it did not include a wonderful horizon of expectation. So he chewed his kolanut, which Ndei-Meyiu had brought, and rolled his tongue into the corners of his jowls to lap out the dryish chaff and then continue to trail his thoughts on the rhythm of his gently moving molars.

Then he paused and listened to the world outside, beyond him; footstep were at the door, but he could not make them out. They were muffled as they knocked against the stones in the yard, and the person seemed to lurch in his walk, and paused at the main door.

'Can I enter?' a strange voice said in Mungaaka as the iron door clanged open a bit.

'Nwuoupang's slave is in his palace,' Asobo-Ntsi replied in Mungaaka too, 'come in.'

But he was shocked that the face he saw was similar to Nwuoupang's. He had heard that some of Nwuoupang's brothers spoke Mungaaka but never believed that the accent could be so perfect, with no traces of Nwuoupang coiling tongue. The bearded face peered at him in the corner suspiciously, as he approached Asobo-Ntsi. Without waiting to be invited he sat down on the edge of a wooden bed on which Asobo-Ntsi piled his personal effects.

'My name is Moundap,' the stranger said laughingly, adjusting the corners of his black robe. 'I come from the forest area to spend a few days with my brother, and asked about you.'

Asobo-Ntsi looked up in surprise, screwing his eyes.

'We heard your story,' Moundap said in answer to the unworded question, 'and when my brother again explained the situation to me, I decided to talk to you.'

He was beginning to get used to the obscure environment, and relaxed more comfortably in the bed, crossing his stretched out

legs. That way he knew he could not offend the Chief who, like most of his colleagues, felt challenged if anyone dared to cross their legs in the presence of what he saw as a menial royalty. He was tentative in his talk, reminding Asobo-Ntsi not to be bothered about the things of this world even as represented by his brother from across the endless waters, but rather be more committed to the force that surpassed all authority on earth. Being stubborn to the rule of Nwuoubang, he went on, slightly twisting the name as expected, Asobo-Ntsi noted, will only aggravate things and prove that he, Asobo-Ntsi, was still not ready to accept the One who sacrificed his own life for that of every human being on earth, no matter their colour. For, he concluded, we are all slaves on this earth, awaiting the day of eternal salvation.

Asobo-Ntsi listened and the blood quickened in his veins. He had heard all of it before, though not in the same words, and what made him want to scream out was the fact that the insanity came in the same words, if through different mouths, like a terrible conspiracy. And here a complete stranger was urging him to turn his back on his own people and deny his own authority, he, Asobo-Ntsi, whom even the Gods respected for keeping his word. Else, Qwang, generous mother earth, would have been vomiting blood from her womb by now!

But Moundap was still talking in his soft drawling manner, taking his time to pronounce his words as if he were talking to a child and afraid of being misunderstood. Asobo-Ntsi listened or appeared to listen in his own manner, how the new Tipahman struggled with his own thoughts over Nwuoupang's one time friend and now prisoner, describing times and places Asobo-Ntsi was impatient with, believing instead in his own past and that of his people: his faith in the things that held his people together had never been shaken, not even by the betrayal of Nwuoupang, and it was not a stranger who would make him think differently.

But when Moundap invited him out for a short walk – to stretch out his legs and refresh his soul – Asobo-Ntsi complied. His cell was actually becoming too stifling, making him almost uncertain about his strength and resolve. He did not know when such an opportunity will ever present itself again for him to walk almost like a free man without giving the guards the strange idea that he, emaciated as he was, would escape. His childhood craving for the

hills still lingered in his battered heart and as he got up and his joints crackled, Asobo-Ntsi knew that nothing would make him change his mind in favour of Nwuoupang's demands. He was right as an individual, and acted rightly in defence of his people. He was never the one to abandon his people on the battlefield because the enemy, as he now saw and described Nwuoupang even to Moundap, offered him comfort in return.

He was telling Moundap grudgingly what angered him most against the enemy, the fact that he choose to believe his rebellious citizens! Which also meant that he, Asobo-Ntsi, was a liar and was partial in his rule. No, he said, those were not the ways of Asobo-Ntsi whose enthronement was meant to ensure the welfare of all of Nyen. His mother's people were not Nyen people, and why should he then favour a particular section of the village without any real benefit to himself? All the quarters provided him with at least a queen, and how could he be partial in his rule? His father never was and it was his intention that his son after him should never be. But he could no longer see the future which he was describing, the way things were; a kind of fear gripped his heart even as he walked and talked with Moundap, reflecting on the past and contemplating what will become of Nyen and his people, in his imminent absence.

They had moved up the knoll that peaked the plateau stretching out in abundant greenery, and then sloped down, at times in a sharp perpendicular gradient, into the extending plain far below. The plain rolled out in undulating beauty with scattered hamlets dotted all over, and ending in rising peaks that were in fact the extension of the Atisong plateau from which the two now surveyed what Moundap always saw as virgin land. He eyed Asobo-Ntsi from the corner of his eye with some misgiving, reading nothing from the inscrutable face that gave out nothing beyond its own willed stubbornness. Still he could not give up; it was his God-assigned task to labour at softening hardened souls that sought to breach their own salvation even if on the sidelines he was busy with his manuscripts that described the strange versions of primitive spirituality. The harder the task, the more rewarding the expectations of salvation: that was his pious morale to every colonial who was beginning to get soft and shed the hardened coat of resistance against tropical wildness and mouth nostalgic sentiments that were unhealthy for the survival of the establishment. For he believed in the possibility of

redemption for even the blackest soul on the threshold of death, and why, Asobo-Ntsi could very well become a lead shepherd of the Lord in his pagan village!

He charted their talk around casual territory that was inoffensive to the stubborn heart of the other. He told Asobo-Ntsi of his own violent childhood in his country. The ultimate pay for him, he said, lifting the lame leg, was a near fatal fall into a ditch when he and his gang had looted a farmer's cart and were being chased. Then when he was twenty-one and heard that Nwuoubang was coming to Tipah with new dreams for the people and needed volunteers, a light had passed over him and urged him to join the team. Njenka' had been a home to him for a long time before he was sent to the forest to minister more souls into the fold. The stories they had heard in his own country about the local people were awful, but once in Tipah, his opinion changed and he concluded that the people were certainly not the same as the ones that his people must have met. He had plans for the village, and immediately made friends with the Fon to open up a school and a church for the improvement of the people.

As he talked Moundap picked wild flowers from the clustered hedges, twisted them around his fingers and then snapped them off his inside thumb with his middle finger. It was a habit that hid his nervousness beside Asobo-Ntsi, talking as they walked the limited space of the peak, and picking and discarding of the flowers already maimed. The heavy rains had given a new coating to the hills and in the freshness Asobo-Ntsi felt the ache of nostalgia, which he thought had died in his detention. But he listened to the other because he had to, without taking anything in. It was just another talking session and he was glad for the opportunity for him to stretch himself without the chains of Tamenji around his ankles, and even as Moundap talked Asobo-Ntsi was affirming his own line of thought. But he was also aware that in the distance, clumsily trying to stay out of sight, were two armed guards monitoring their movements and relationship. As if he was foolish enough to try and take a cheap, cowardly way out for his freedom.

'So you see,' Moundap concluded, 'I have been a very bad man right from childhood.' He paused to pull off a stubborn flower, reflecting at the same time about the self-evidence against himself in the service of his Master. That was a good one he thought, turning to Asobo-Ntsi with the cunning broad smile that bounced back at him,

off the wooden face of the Fon. 'But it is never too late to change, as I discovered, and do good things.'

'But what have I done to Nwuoubang,' Asobo-Ntsi lamented, 'to deserve this?' He was bitter and Moundap knew that the question was in fact a stark declaration of his innocence.

'Oh, nothing that cannot be corrected,' the other said, not knowing how to proceed. Asobo-Ntsi was such a wall against which speech was useless; you felt him and his seething emotions more than you heard him, Moundap already realised. And knew what Scott would say, I warned you, didn't I?

Moundap cleared his throat unnecessarily.

'Just this morning,' he continued, 'my brother, Nwuoubang, was telling me about the great friendship that exists between the two of you...'

'Existed,' Asobo-Ntsi said with a short crackling laugh.

'Yes,' Moundap said in embarrassment, 'and that he will do everything to maintain it if ... if only you will cooperate...' he faltered off.

'How?'

Moundap tore savagely at a flower and smiled into Asobo-Ntsi's face.

'He is your friend,' he said, 'and you best know how.' Then he smiled again, looking awkward. 'I am only an adviser to both of you, as a servant Bâ who sits on high.' Then he paused in a moody suspension and crushed off the flower at the same time, his eyes blank and unseeing, surveying the expanding land below them.

'You see,' he began, spreading out his large hand in an explanatory gesture, 'we can all be masters over this vast territory, making rules and believing in them. That is not bad as long as we know and accept the fact that there is a more superior Master above to whom we must give all honour.'

He glanced at Asobo-Ntsi and saw desperate impatience painted over his face. Moundap shuddered inside, and would have loved to weep over this show of strength by what he was already scribbling away in his manuscripts as the very corner stone of stark paganism. It was wrong, absolutely so, and if only such as Asobo-Ntsi knew the price they and their people will pay on the day of reckoning! Was the Lord's impartial Grace not self-evident in the ultimate sacrifice of His only Son to cleanse our blackened souls with

the blood of life? What more could sinner man expect, after such boundless benevolence? What father would do that to an only Son? He cast another expectant look at the inflexible face standing besides him and then at the green undulating vastness below.

‘He must have been a wicked father then,’ Asobo-Ntsi said and Moundap was shocked to the roots of his soul. ‘Every father should hope for his son to bury him, not he burying the son’. His explanation was as casual as a good morning on a typical spring morning, Moundap thought.

‘But He is not that type of father,’ Moundap said, trying not to scream his frustration. But he also realised that this way of talking with the pagan Chief was derailing his purpose and so coiling his tongue back to the imposing imagery on which they stood, he pleaded with Asobo-Ntsi to listen to him for a while.

‘This is your earthly kingdom,’ he said in a trembling voice. ‘It is beautiful and fertile, and the Father has given you authority over it; but in ruling you must also think of the other Kingdom He has prepared for you, and be grateful in anticipation. But you can never be admitted into that Kingdom if you fail to cooperate with Nwuoubang, His messenger to us. The only thanks we can give Nwuoubang for bringing the Light to us is to be grateful to him in obedience. What is difficult in that? Be grateful and cooperate and there will be no trouble with Nwuoubang, and no problem in the eye of the Lord.’

He had struggled to make his point, and once he started he knew he must go on, else he will never say what he had to. And what better way was there than to surrender his own identity to that of the other? It was part of the diplomacy of salvation which he was discovering in this wild hinterland of creation, and he resorted to it in every prospective conclave of emergent resistance.

‘Nwuoubang is dividing my people and making them to disobey me,’ Asobo-Ntsi said.

It was now the turn of Moundap to betray desperation on his blackening ruddy face of groomed piety; it was clear that the Fon had not followed his oration, locked up in his own self-esteem of painful pride. Who can blame Scott then, for acting tough with the man? Such a sly creature, this Fon, whose only consciousness was his pride and nothing else, even when it worked against him; he represented the forces of evil that Moundap had fought against all along, and

must not relax, even now when a negative verdict was sure to come in from Lagos against the inflated native! For, in a sudden show of sympathy, the Native Court had appealed the case to Lagos and it was going to be some months, probably into the new year, before the final verdict arrived. Before that, Moundap thought, it was part of his divine duty to try and guarantee salvation for the wayward ego. But what did the man know about disobedience when he failed to obey a messenger of the Lord, apart from his sacrilegious description of the good Lord? For Moundap saw Scott and the entire white colony, irrespective of whether they were missionaries, researchers, or colonial administrators, and within which he was already being described as a straying member, as one man with several personalities; and then saw the one man as nothing else if not God's errand boy. He even referred to that embodied personality in one of his celebrated sermons as 'the kid brother of our Lord and Saviour,' drawing striking physical parallels to justify himself, half in the hope that the visiting bishop that day was to put the needed push behind his request for a workshop on 'Retarding Native Ideology and the Mission of the Lord' that had been scheduled for London the following year. He so desperately needed to see the ancient spires of London again, and to feel what it was like to be back home, even if only for a while. Although a bout of malaria fever prevented him from attending the workshop during which, as per reports that sanctioned it, there was a lot of intellectual flirtation over the mounting evidence of a primitive renaissance for Euroope, Moundap still believed in the day of the Lord for him and his vision. So how was he to relent now, admit the sanity of a recalcitrant native Chief whom he barely tolerated? He was embarrassed and did not know how to tune the talk to a kind of conclusion, if only to return home for his afternoon tea with Scott and the rest of the party. It had been a failure, his fight against this personification of evil, and without giving up hope of eventual success, he had to retreat and avail himself of more spiritual strength.

So he mangled a few disjointed words of conciliation, retracing the way down the heights and back to the Fort where light patriotic music was coming from the brass band, and prayed that the day may not be long in coming when Asobo-Ntsi will live in the Lord, his people with him, thereafter, and serve as evidence to other pagan tribes of the Lord's assured victory.

Asobo-Ntsi was cuddled in the corner of the cell where his bed was placed, his knees raised to his chin and his back hunched against the wall as his hands circled his pulled-up legs. He was smitten by his own thoughts as they crawled through his mind in painful recollections of faith and betrayal. He was almost a stranger to his own ideals now, no longer able to flex himself against the targets of his strength and throw open his chest against adversity, challenging. Was he not the one who had hoped to open a path for his people, and were they not recognising that, even if grudgingly so? He had spat fire against them, it was true, but then he had to do that as Asobo-Ntsi, to give them that which it was his duty to provide. That also included his friendship with Nwuoupang, which the people too had come to respect. But now that fire was turned against his own exposed head, now away from his palace and unable to control the affairs of the land. What could Mafor do alone? For all her strength, she was still a woman and was sure to collapse, if she had not yet done so, when the pressure was too hard against her.

It was his fifth moon of humiliation at the Fort, and thinking about the pace of events ever since his arrival there, Asobo-Ntsi again heard himself saying, Asobo-Ntsi, what are you doing here, sitting like a widow with nothing to expect from the world? Then he would urge himself to get up and walk away, the hero of his heart, and walk back home to the supremacy of his reign. He screamed often, in his heart, and looking around in sudden bewilderment at his own emotions ebbing away with his strength, or that which he once possessed, Asobo-Ntsi was even more embarrassed at the indifferent faces of his notables. They chatted in subdued tones and even laughed, ate the food that Nwuoupang provided, and mocked their own clumsiness within the new environment. They had learned to ignore Asobo-Ntsi too with his scathing temper and behaved as if they thought he was not present. They were already falling in love with what they had rejected, and now Asobo-Ntsi was the stumbling block against their new desires.

In his loneliness, Asobo-Ntsi sifted his thoughts in tiny trickles, feeding on the intensity of his helplessness. He saw himself

on the day the investigating team returned from Nyen bearing the bundle on which Nwuoupang had been feeding himself ever since. He had summoned Asobo-Ntsi, his face contorted with disbelief and as red as the anus of a chimpanzee as he surveyed the displayed evidence.

‘Ahaa!’ Asobo-Ntsi had said without realising the difference, ‘dem all witch!’ He was victorious, vindicated against his enemies, and was confident that Nwuoupang would ask the guards to escort him back to Nyen. But it was not so; Nwuoupang had rebuked him instead, his small eyes squinting into tiny pebbles that shone from his forehead, and seemed to bore a hole through the glasses hooked onto his nose. Then he told Asobo-Ntsi that as things then stood, he could not decide on the case, that it was for his superiors to do so in Buea and Lagos.

Asobo-Ntsi recalled the trek back into the cell, and how every day he waited in vain for a favourable verdict. And then the humiliating transformation of his men into labourers for Nwuoupang’s works, breaking stones and raising his fortifications; and his removal to a different residence, a day after he was shown the evidence of his guilt, a bit isolated from the rest of the native camp: a momentary flattery that was soon disturbed by the non-appearance of Nwuoupang to pay him visit. He had then sent Cho-Muluh to Chamfa, requesting a meeting with Nwuoupang. The reply had been brief: it was not possible, for Nwuoupang only received people who were ready to cooperate with him. Asobo-Ntsi bit his lip in bitterness; his blood raged against everything he had stood for and admired in Nwuoupang. If only he could smash it all down beginning with himself! That was when he began to refuse food.

‘He is not hungry then,’ Tamenji had said when told of Asobo-Ntsi’s action; ‘he will eat when hunger assails him.’

The next day he had been separated from his notables. As soon as that happened, Scott had put them through his interrogative machine, pricking them on all spots to get what he wanted and as hoped for, they had cooperated: an old cranky witch called Ti-Ndoh was the culprit, as the priest of the ngvouré ritual. Then Asobo-Ntsi was again summoned and asked to surrender Ti-Ndoh. His eyes dilated in a murderous intent as he surveyed his men huddled on their hunches and betraying their Fon (and watching him Scott wondered if he ever knew the man and could ever contain him).

Asobo-Ntsi groaned, listening to the winds of his own doom whistling from afar. He was being asked to break one of the fingers on his hand that he used in building and cleansing his village, if Ti-Ndoh must go. But who had ever heard of such a thing, except that he, Asobo-Ntsi was no longer fit to rule! And if he was not, who could? The finger belongs to the hand that was owned by Asobo-Ntsi. Cut of his hand then? Never! And he stared at his men and felt their guilty tremble in their hearts, and again walked away telling Nwuoupang that he alone did what was now evident to him.

That night he was transferred back into the main cell to meet his men who were scared and apologetic, and hypnotised by fear into silence. The paired rings had been clapped round their necks; movement was restricted and one of the pair could not go out to urinate without dragging the other along. It was the humiliation of his manhood, Asobo-Ntsi knew, in which his men were victimised. But Cho-Muluh slipped out of his own ring because of his wiry frame, and served not only Asobo-Ntsi, but also the rest of the inmates. His pal was a Tewirikumman who had been in jail for so long he did not know what to do with himself, he said, if he were ever to be freed. He seemed the only person who understood Asobo-Ntsi's attitude. How else could a man defend himself as a man, he argued, except to act the way Tsa-apifor was doing?

Asobo-Ntsi again lived the long and cold nights with the dry winds whispering through the trees and boulders as the rains became heavy. The men huddled together on their bare plank beds stuffed with dry plantain leaves that rustled noisily with the slightest move, with very thin sheet for cover. At dawn they almost shouted with joy, but unable to smile and laugh as they would have loved to because then, their parched lips would crack and show trickles of blood. The later pain during the day could not be endured when chewed tobacco juice spilled into the open cracks; then they would suck wildly at their lips, confused by the pain and not knowing what to do. Yet they went out to work every morning with a humility that was degrading to their persons, still preferring the forced counterpart of their days to the cold nights of limited freedom. Asobo-Ntsi was a worker apart, revered by even the haughty guards who must then have their kolanut, if not directly then indirectly through Tamenji, in such moments of rare condescension to royalty, for it to sit under a shed or where there was none, on a spot away from the work area.

Sa'amontoh always ensured that there were enough kappas to bail off Asobo-Ntsi even at the workplace if the guards became unpredictable, and further negotiated himself off at night to go abroad. But he must back before dawn and at times surrendered all what he had gathered to the guards, his manly heart breaking, before he could be allowed back into the cell. Still they gave in, thinking of how things used to be when Asobo-Ntsi and Nwuoupang were friends, and now who could oppose the stubborn will of Nwuoupang without risking slashes on his bare back, bent over igneous boulders?

The days crawled on and humiliation clung to Asobo-Ntsi's voice whenever he uttered a word or two to his men, breaking his self-imposed silence. He was withdrawn into himself for very long periods during which time he communed with himself and then with his ancestors. He was learning a new joy, and was almost jealous of sharing it by communicating with others. His mind wandered in his moments of silence, and his energy was renewed against the enemy.

It was clear that after Moundap's visit Nwuoupang had also hardened his own stance against Asobo-Ntsi, denying him even the former pleasure of sitting in the prison yard under the beams of the full moon, to smoke his pipe before crawling back into his bed of humiliation. He had been pensive at such moments, the thick smoke giving him such pleasure as nothing else could and often, his eyes watered from too much concentration on the distant skyline dimly framed. But Nwuoupang had deprived him even of that, angered by his own useless submission to a native Chief.

Asobo-Ntsi was glad, tickled by his stubborn posture against Nwuoupang, and awaited what, from rumours being fanned by the prison guards, was now inevitable. But he refused to give in to the further cowardice of betraying his slaves. It was only a normal sacrifice, the notables argued, that was justified by the gains of war. Was the slave not the ultimate cleanser in a ritual of blood? How else could they maintain the dignity of their village and of their Fon if the booty of war could not be used to ensure their safety? But Asobo-Ntsi was deaf to their supplication, silently hailing Ti-Ndoh as his hero, the man who had made it possible for all of Nyen and Nwuoupang to understand that Asobo-Ntsi was a man of his words. Or did they understand, after all, he wondered. But that too did not bother him; it will not be long before every doubt was cleared, if that was what they waited for, to acknowledge his manhood. He even

suspected that Nwuoupang was behind the rumours about the fate of Asobo-Ntsi now spreading through the camp: it was another means of breaking his back and bringing him to his knees, Asobo-Ntsi reflected, smiling indolently to himself.

For he was also weak, physically, surviving only on his pipe and kolanut mostly, hoping to hasten the end for Nwuoupang who was too cowardly on his part to do his own will. The notables pleaded with Asobo-Ntsi to swallow just a lump of achu' and when the pleas became unbearable, he will stare at them in blind anger that they understood without being told, amounted to a threat to curse. Then they would withdraw into their corners and remain silent for sometime, listening to the quiet night listlessly working out its mysteries. To convince himself that he was still alive Asobo-Ntsi would then spend the time chewing his thoughts in deliberate bits, anxious too not to chew everything in one crunch, until he submitted to the drowse of sleep pulling relentlessly at his eyelids. For his mind was active still, in his weakened repose, traversing seasons of active pride, and trying to foresee and pattern out those of coming uncertainty, as far as he could see, after him. That was his main worry for now, the state of Nyen and his people when he will no longer be there to determine for them what they should do or not do. He smiled again, thinking of how Nwuoupang and his men had been deceived by his weak state and declared him unfit for work. That was just what he needed now, time to be alone when his men were out to work, to think things out for himself and Nyen after him.

After the encounter with Moundap several other personalities to the Fort tried to coerce Asobo-Ntsi, but baffled by the failing man's stiffness, they too mumbled neutral words of concession, and promised to see him again, probably the following day, before leaving. But often, that was the last he saw of them; else he was chanced to see them as they sneaked away very early the following morning without stopping to say farewell to Asobo-Ntsi as they had promised the previous day before they finally parted. Nwuoupang accompanied the visitors some distance, and returning one day, sent word to Asobo-Ntsi through Chamfa. The notables and the other prisoners had already gone to work and the only sound in the yard

came from Cho-Muluh who had been exempted from work for some days now, to take care of Asobo-Ntsi. He was engaged in cracking kernels on the flat surface of a flint sandstone, dexterously hitting them to bring out the nuts whole. Asobo-Ntsi cherished them as the substitute for tobacco and kolanut, oiling his thoughts and watching the sun go down toward Tewirikum.

'Is your father in?' Chamfa said, standing over Cho-Muluh, his feet apart, and a sneering look of despondency on his face.

Cho-Muluh stared in stupefaction, not knowing what to say. He opened his mouth but no word came out, and as he tried to get to his feet, Chamfa pushed him aside and walked into the dark cell.

'Nwuoubang salutes you, Asobu-Shi,' he said with the arrogance of a Tipahman.

Asobo-Ntsi did not answer. But he should have known that Chamfa needed no answer to continue, after all Asobo-Ntsi's opinion was not really required.

'Nwuoubang says the man who is guilty of the killings in Nyen,' he continued, 'has to die three markets from tomorrow at sunrise. That is what has been decided by the big Nwuoubang far away, and I have been asked to inform you.'

Then he turned away, and as abruptly as he came in, he walked out, his starched khaki trousers swishing as he placed his mastered steps.

Asobo-Ntsi bit his lip in anger that could no longer be caged. What did they expect of him now? To thank Nwuoupang for preserving his frail body so far for their satisfaction in the final act? Or was he to weep like a widow who has lost her lone child, go on his knees and beg for mercy? His heart boiled with hatred against those humiliating him and he wished he could stand up then and let them see a bit of what his muscles were capable of doing! His mind was abroad already, walking mysterious byways where his ancestors converged on his desolation and proffered him forward in his supreme moment of need. They had never abandoned him, he knew, so how could they now when he was suddenly alone in the world, with no one to lean on but his own frail self? He felt the invisible hands that gripped him, and steadied him onto his majestic throne, a man of pride, even if alone now, shedding his worries and looking ahead steadfast to the final confrontation between him and Nwuoupang. Yes, his ancestors were with him, he felt them all

around him, breathing the mysteries of uncountable seasons down his spine, stiffening him into the deadly arrow that must do justice to the bow of the Nyen people.

Then someone coughed and Asobo-Ntsi rallied back from his trance, and noticed the sneaky figure of Cho-Muluh who had shuffled into the room after the departure of Chamfa and observed Asobo-Ntsi from the shadows.

Asobo-Ntsi smiled weakly, reassuring, and although Cho-Muluh did not see the smile, he felt the life that had returned into the body of his Fon.

‘You have to go to Sa’amontoh immediately,’ Asobo-Ntsi said, ‘and tell him that I have to see Mafor and Teneng tomorrow night.’

‘But ‘Tsa-apifor,’ Cho-Muluh protested, ‘I cannot leave you alone!’

‘Has Asobo-Ntsi become a child that cannot be trusted on its own?’ His voice was weak and husky, dragged out from a hollow.

‘I did not say so, ‘Tsa-apifor!’ Cho-Muluh cried out, slightly backing off.

‘Then since when did you start exchanging words with Asobo-Ntsi over his desires?’

Cho-Muluh was subdued, his head bowed in testimony. He knew where the prisoners had gone for work; they were building a road from Atisong to Alahbæfu and already Cho-Muluh was planning how he was to gather ripe palm nuts for Asobo-Ntsi to be buried in the warm ashes of the evening fire. His mouth watered as he imagined the warm oil dripping from his lips as he sank his teeth into the softness of the nut.

Tamenji looked at his boss, as he loved to refer to Scott, with mixed emotions. It was clear that the man was going through a difficult period in his life, in deciding over Asobo-Ntsi. Tamenji remembered the story of Pontius Pilate, but Christ was not a black Chief still caught in black magical practices and hailing them. So why should his boss wish to kill himself over a witch Chief who still clung to his own savagery? Although the final decision had rested with Buea and then Lagos, Scott, as the man at the source, with on-the-spot incriminating

facts, had a significant role to play. He could call for a suspended sentence, or for the case to be completely reviewed from his end, in which case a few facts will be 'dusted'. That was the prerogative of the man on the field, even one often given over to sentimental nonsense with which his superiors took offence. But how was he to do that without appearing to give in to the proud native Chief under him?

He paced his narrowed office space endlessly, irritated by the least occurrence, and then sat tight-lipped over his tea brooding and muttering from time to time. In the evenings, after his bath, he swung from the hanging net on his veranda, listening to his own thoughts as they sneaked into his mind and became visible presences of his dread. He had come to love this job in this distant, uncreated jungle, surveying his dominion from the jagged cliffs that stood out against the shadows of the moonlit night like the very horror of his heart. For Asobo-Ntsi was on his mind like a burden and in his troubled indecision he began to doubt the practical utility of his mission, which he had often taken for granted, defined from London in aggregate terms of service.

The bottle of whisky became a regular companion, with a made-up alibi to himself, of driving away the threat of malaria; and he wondered if he were not the one, really, going through the throes of execution. His close collaborators eyed him suspiciously and dutifully performed their tasks with the same meticulous keenness. Only their strident 'Yes, Sir' betrayed their nervous awareness of something without name hanging over all of them, urging them to run or skip in normal duty. Swinging from the net, his hairy legs spread out in a rascally manner, Scott was always aware of the bottle of scotch whiskey that was always handy, on a high stool. He watched its level, almost with the self-conscious meticulous awareness of a builder observing the spirit level of his plank, as the liquid danced in the bottle and subsided and his head swayed and turned, and his mind brooded in wild excursions and then went blank. Was anyone in the whole colonial enterprise ever as burdened as he was at that moment? His mind would become void at times, then rallied back, rolled up into a tight bundle of knowledge, only to roll off again, like the undulating landscape of his authority. Authority, that was it! How much of it, indeed, was his? Was his strength not a mere strand of his own whiskey imagination now

foaming at the frills of this colonial circus? For, he was convinced in the end that he was acting in lieu, a mere appendage to the real power-centre, thousands of miles away from his enclaved precincts.

'By the time you reach the noon of your administrative career,' a visiting colleague from Buea had warned him once, 'you'll realise that your Bapinyi Marverick is actually no hero to write home about but a magician like the rest of them whose only purpose is to waylay your mission'.

His hand strayed to the glass oftener and he gripped it and felt his strength come back, his confidence, and his vision. Yes, he was seeing more clearly now, ahead, divining the passage for his own thoughts, for so long trapped in a mesh of loyal servitude. For, he was meant to be the ideal citizen, phrased in abstractions of some ideological craze, victimising his own intimate secrets. Ah, he moaned to himself, how desperate he had gone down the curious road of a sustained ideology, denying himself and his own strength in the process! Now he was opening up, as the path of his life seemed to open up ahead, and for the first time he was putting the one-and-one of his disperse life together, his strength and his denied self. His period of loyal enslavement was coming to an end, and he felt the pulse of his brains and of his heart, to know his own stature in the moment of confrontation. The records were there, evidence of his faithful service. They shall bail him out. History shall bail him out and prove the fact that he was true to the point that he could humanly endure. And then he gained knowledge, and saw beyond the lie, the cultured evidence against his own person, and then ascended into his own. He could rally the stiff primitive opposition of the natives to the throne of England to his own advantage; what was opposed was not himself but what that himself represented in abstraction. For he felt the tribal fury beating every night on the heavy waves of the wind, always targeting the abstraction he represented. Even his own loyal men, he knew, were only awaiting the moment of elemental consensus. Then he would be rejected like he never was. But he could circumvent all that now, twist the will of England into his own centre of gravity where he felt the pulse of things like a hypnotic dream. He will carve out his dominion, award the local Chiefs into his loyalty, even Asobo-Ntsi who was perhaps only another version of his own recalcitrance, and have no more queries to answer, never! He had been lying in this English periphery, and worst of all lying to

himself. The little bits of stories, phrased for the Highlands Gazette, were a big insult to his own dignity. But that was soon to come to an end.

Yet, he dreaded his expectations from Lagos and its effect on his administration. A telegraphed message had already insinuated discordance in evidence by suggesting that the absence of 'fresh' skulls could not rule out the possibility of a man being condemned on the strength of evidence from a previous, unnoticed, crime scene. Scott's entrails churned pathetically and even in the midst of hilarious company such as he had when he offered a farewell dinner to any of his numerous visitors, he was never very sure of himself and of his surroundings, recalling that chilling phrase. He would pour wine into his guest's glass, and they had laughed off Asobo-Ntsi's pristine foolishness, with hilarious echoes from his other collaborators on the Fort. And then the following day, after seeing off his visitor, the cold dread he had put off for some time returned and he was helpless in its grip. He ticked off the days on his table calendar with a premonition of confession that he was too conscious of himself to admit. He was the King's own representative in this wild jungle and how could he compromise the shiny and ever receding horizon of the Crown with visitations of fostered sentimentality? Besides, he had done it before, yes, to many natives, some almost as important in stature as Asobo-Ntsi. So why should he allow the prospect of one more victim deprive him of his peace of mind? He gulped his gin, allowed the liquid to linger a bit in his mouth before swallowing with a liberating vengeance, and felt the burning sensation down his throat. He was being restored to himself and to his sense of duty; he felt it, gradually, in the hot sensation that gave him his manhood and pointed out the direction of duty. It was right, what had to be done, and he was justified in being the chance executor of the royal will. How else was the horizon to continue dancing far away, always away, unreachable, into the distance of England's glory? The shimmering evidence, conjured on the spur of the moment by his straddling brains, provided the tentacles of his resolve, and he swayed off his net, now penitent, turning in like the fulfilled king of his realm, bleary-eyed. Then he longed for home, imagining the Empire Day confetti exceptionally sprayed out for him; then the speeches in his honour, describing every detail of his daring sojourn amongst brutes in the service of the Empire and his King; the medals that must

follow amidst hurrahs descending on him like tiny snow flakes; and in all this, one quiet woman, perhaps, extending a slim white hand tentatively, beaten by the neglect of Time, hoping for the mysteries of time-reborn. And in his drowsed mind, crawling into bed, he felt the eternal echoes of the old song, urging him on, to scatter England's enemies and collapse them in their politics.

In the morning, however, he was again stiff, and slouched out of his fenced bathroom denouncing the intoxication of the previous evening, ever attentive to the call of duty. He had to be alert especially against his own weaknesses. Pray always, Scott, he screamed silently to himself, never to give in to wanton imaginings that are planted in your mind by pride! His boots clicked in agreement as he turned from the Union Jack and kicked his way into the office, clinging to the polished will he was meant to affirm. But once inside he could not really escape from the heaviness of the file at hand and laboured at it repentantly.

The days went by unhurried and everyone around the Fort seemed to await the next day with a sense of inevitability. One event seemed to ensnare every other thing, and the chaos of activity was caught between the rising and setting sun as if all was well.

Scott blinked and was almost immediately awake, as a morning ray stabbed his eyes through the spaces in his window. He did not have to ask how he found himself in bed; like everything around him now, he was getting used to that which was not effected by his individual stimulus, and therefore to also getting late out of bed. It will be useless to ask Chamfa or Tamenji: they were sure to lie, as usual, describing how he marched into his room and went to sleep. Ever dutiful as master of his own heart, he sprang out of bed, a faint bang in his skull, and threw off his nightgown, knowing that his warm shower was already in the tin-circled bath.

Cho-Muluh was the first to hear the gentle scratching at the door; habit had made him attentive to the least sound and in his mind at this stage, just anything could be magnified into dramatic proportion.

He listened again, and once more, this time more definite, he heard the sound of chains and knew the door was being unlocked. He shook Mbahnong who was snoring besides him, his huge nostrils blaring like a cracked palace trumpet. But the Tewirikumman was far away.

Asobo-Ntsi had also heard the noise outside.

'It is Sa'amontoh,' he said from his corner. 'Turn up the turukang and wake the others.'

Cho-Muluh struggled for a while to get out of his neck ring for Mbahnong had somehow coiled himself around the cord. He turned up the wick of the improvised oil lamp and the lurid light framed out the stony walls of the room into obscure spectacles. Some of the men were already stirring as the door creaked open and Sa'amontoh came in, closely followed by Teneng and Mafor. Mafor and the boy were wrapped in thick palace ndop. Teneng looked around suspiciously, unsure of his environment, without making out anything. A third man, a prison guard, acting on Tamenji's instructions, went to Ndiyzé's bed and fidgeted with his chain before slipping out of the room almost unnoticeable.

'My lord!' Mafor gasped in a sharp whisper, beginning to get used to the light.

Asobo-Ntsi smiled weakly, adjusting himself into a sitting position. But she saw it all, beyond the smile, that he was trying to please her and assure her that all was well with him and with the land of Nyen. Instinct told her what she had feared all along, the moment that Sa'amontoh came for her and Teneng. She looked again, blinking through the momentary terror of her fears, and saw the man she had long considered as a son and as a husband, if at times he was too stubborn and made her weep for him in her heart, and saw how dwindled he had become all of a sudden. It was no longer her son and husband she saw there in the sombre room, with thin frail arms now showing through the openings of his gown, his cheek bones too showing through his hairy face as if he had been famished for a whole season. But the spark in his eyes refused to die and gave life to the speck that remained of Asobo-Ntsi.

'My lord!' she repeated as if she were echoing her thoughts, choked beyond speech.

Sa'amontoh had tried in his crafty way to tell them how things were, but that was nothing compared to the spectre of

livelessness which Mafor now beheld. In a blinking flash she saw him again in his royal stature, hard and supreme, dispensing his goodwill in moments of gaiety and then changing like a turbulent sky in blunt madness when he was elemental and smashed everything in his passage, even with a mere word. That was her lord, Mafor reflected, surveying and gently pulling at the long frail fingers that cracked under her strength like dry twigs.

Their eyes met and Asobo-Ntsi again smiled. But he could not deceive even a child with that blank look. Then she reached into her basket and brought out an earthen bowl of mbang, which Asobo-Ntsi accepted without the usual enthusiasm of the palace days. He pinched out one and slipped it into his mouth and began to munch slowly. It seemed a long time before he swallowed and tackled a second. His notables, now crowded around him and blundering in their neck burdens, looked on, amazed too at the change. And as if to spite their thoughts Asobo-Ntsi handed back the bowl to Mafor, shaking his head. She understood, and passed the dish on to a notable.

‘What is this they have done to you, Asobo-Ntsi?’ she said in a trembling authoritative voice that could annihilate colonial authority itself. The notables heard the voice and for the first time really recognised the personality now squatting besides Asobo-Ntsi.

‘Nothing that I did not court,’ he said and smiled again. ‘It is the stubborn child, mother, who brings woe to the homestead,’ and he again smiled weakly, his white teeth showing like a snarl.

But on a sudden impulse he looked up and his eyes arrested Sa’amontoh in a silent query. The royal face was abstracted into a grave mask that refused to be recognised, ruminating on the final path of its fulfilment without any hindrance, alone, as it should be. The wrinkles around his eyes gathered into a well-knit web as he screwed up his eyes and focused from one notable to the next as if he was no longer seeing, or seeing them for the first time. It was a revelation that only few in the group had heard from lore, the rare moment of royal transformation when, spiritually, the flame went out in the palace even before the physical phenomenon. Mafor and the men around Asobo-Ntsi waited and watched as his eyes traversed the gathering in a slow unseeing manner, then lingered on Teneng for a while, assessing him from the potency of ancestral prophecy: he had to be invested with unworded authority and shielded with invisible

balm for the task ahead, yet unknown to him. Then the eyes again wandered off, surveying and noting, and finally rested on Sa'amontoh.

Sa'amontoh understood, for the moment had come, often prophesied in wait, for words to abandon action, and for the latter to be enacted in meditative certainty of what had been prophesied and was coming to pass. The people waited and looked on, clogged together in amazement, as Sa'amontoh squatted on his knees and groped under Asobo-Ntsi's bed for a while and then brought out a neatly tied bundle. Without a word he handed it to Ndiyzé who, liberated from his chains had assumed his vantage position besides Asobo-Ntsi and began untying it. Then Sa'amontoh again fetched the royal stool from the dark corner where it had been covered with plantain leaves, now yellowish and brown. He dusted it and placed it in the centre of the room where it looked haggardly out of place, the seat of Nyen now exposed to the ridicule of foreign buttocks, as Asobo-Ntsi had recently been moaning. And such buttocks he would add, that would fart and then accuse the stool in self-defence.

Asobo-Ntsi again nodded as if responding to some rhythm without sound, and Sa'amontoh moved forward and grabbed Teneng by the hand and hurled him toward Ndiyzé, who had positioned himself besides the stool in readiness. The boy, realising what was expected of him became still in resistance, attempting to snap off; but the grip was as firm as ever and in that flitting moment he wondered if Ndiyzé was ever going to get old.

'Do not make it difficult, Teneng,' Sa'amontoh said, trying to subdue him. His mind too was wandering under the sudden spell of the ceremony, and while he pitied the boy he also understood what Nyen expected of him.

'But I cannot!' Teneng cried out in a heart-rending moan.

The two stared at each other in a tense moment of confrontation, a sneering smile on the face of the elder, confronting a look of frightened determination that distorted the boy's face. Ndiyzé waited, as was his lot to wait, for the moment when he will be expected to clear the path and provide passage, once more, for Nyen.

'If he resists, tether him down!'

It was the old, arrogant voice of Asobo-Ntsi, suddenly invigorated, his mind fixed: had he not had time during his incarceration, to think and plan things out? And was he to watch his

own son, the next burden-bearer, smash up everything?

As if he were waiting for such a cue from Asobo-Ntsi, Sa'amontoh suddenly swept Teneng off his feet in an unsuspecting flash of his left hand, at the same time fending off surprised struggle from Teneng with his right, and the boy found himself bundled up against the old man's chest. He could smell stale tobacco and wrinkled his nose, against it all, and kicked out vehemently. But Ndiyzé was approaching the pair, and reached out and took Teneng's hand that appeared lame from Sa'amontoh's charge. Then he walked the short distance back to the stool, as Sa'amontoh paced up behind him in a clumsy walk. Ndiyzé nodded at Sa'amontoh, still holding Teneng's hand, and the boy was lowered onto the royal stool of Nyen, his face contorted with the misery of his birth.

Ndiyzé smiled and turned to Asobo-Ntsi who smiled too, a sudden light coming into his eyes. They were all living the mystery, and no one could tolerate an abortion of the process now, else Nyen was doomed.

The royal gourd was brought out of its fibre sack, and Mafor, recalling her role from the untrodden lanes of the mystery, girded her angwashi around her waist more firmly with a looped twine and stood up in her towering manner whenever she was ceremonial, and then assisted Asobo-Ntsi to his feet. If the situation had made it impossible for princesses to pick the next in line, Mafor knew that the people also had an alternative structure which she personified, and no one shall question the validity of the ceremony as long as she participated. The Fon allowed himself to be pulled up, lapsing in a recalcitrant lull, and felt his shoulder joint snap as Mafor gave a gentle tug. Someone presented him with the royal horn into which the wine was poured. He gulped it without pause, suddenly energised. It was re-filled; he half drank it and then offered it to Ndiyzé who sipped twice before returning it to Asobo-Ntsi who then offered it to Teneng. The boy looked as if he was going to pass out, and stared at the old man with wide-open eyes.

'Father,' he cried in a strangled voice, 'you cannot do this to me!' His voice trembled and he was choked by his own emotions.

'Do you hear him?' Asobo-Ntsi said to no one in particular. 'The boy is blind.'

Then he laughed in a husky crackle and the dry sound vibrated from his chest like someone stepping on dry leaves.

'It is not for you to decide when to do what, son,' Ndiyzé said, shaking his head decisively to underscore the way the past keeps on reasserting itself in human stubbornness. It was the same thing with Asobo-Ntsi, he recalled, even when he was more matured, weeping and kicking out, and vowing to run away to his mother's people as soon as the retainers liberated him. But he not only stayed, but also became the dread of all of Nyen in the manner of his rule, loving his crown and through it his people almost to the point of being insane. That was it; power had gone into the man's head like Awah-Mbang's wine, and he, Ndiyzé, needed all the tact of his years to withhold him from taking Nyen with him over the cliff. And now Teneng too was acting out his own part when he did not even know what kingship was!

'He pretends not to be seeing the corpse in front of him,' Asobo-Ntsi was saying, dragging Ndiyzé away from his thoughts, 'or else he is still too young to recognise one?'

Then he laughed again dryly, and looked around him almost nervously as his men simply looked on, as if hypnotised.

'He is Tsa-apifor's own son,' Ndesoh put in, relieved to break the tension.

Then Mecham coughed noisily, stepping forward, as if Ndesoh's words had empowered him.

'Come on young man,' he said, addressing Teneng, 'Asobo-Ntsi has to go on a long visit tomorrow, and someone has to sit on his throne in the mean time!'

'Ndiyzé and Mafor have always done that for Nyen,' Teneng said, his voice threatening to break. 'Why me now?'

'Because Ndiyzé will not always be there,' Mafor said. 'I may always be there for as long as possible, but not Ndiyzé. Come now my father, it your own daughter begging you,' she implored.

'Why?' Asobo-Ntsi barked, looking up from a brief moment of pensive meditation. 'Why should he do this to me now? Sa'amontoh, pour it down his throat and let Ndiyzé apply the potion. This is not the moment to beg!'

'Father, let me drink then from cupped hands!' And he gestured in desperation.

'Never!'

Then Sa'amontoh knew, from the way Asobo-Ntsi looked at him, that the burden rested once more on his shoulders to ensure the

primal sip that should strengthen every root in Nyen. At that moment too, his resolve reasserted itself against any form of sentimentality, and the grip tightened on the boy's head, pinning him to his chest in a merciless grip with the crook of his elbow, and the other hand somehow restraining Teneng's hands.

'I will drink then!' Teneng gasped, struggling feebly against the strong, hairy arms.

Sa'amontoh relaxed his hold, but just enough to allow the boy the freedom of a normal drink.

Ndiyzé approached him almost on tiptoes, suddenly apprehensive, aware of the immensity of the task to be performed. It weighed him down and he longed for the moment when it will be over and he will oil his hands and await the orders of the new Fon, as it was his lot to await in complementary thoughts and deeds, without complaining. He regarded the boy for a brief moment and felt him transforming already into the realms of mystery to become one of the Gods' untouchables, and it was not of his own will then that his hand stretched out and handed the horn to Teneng. The boy accepted the horn and looked around with a timid elegance of innocence, and once more Ndiyzé felt his own hand guiding the horn to the boy's lips, performing the will of the Gods in the quiet of the night, in a foreign land. The tears were flowing silently from the eyes of the boy as he swallowed the drink. But Ndiyzé was also unaware of the tears; he had witnessed them before, and took them for the last strand of ordinary manhood being shed for the potency of unknown forces.

Ndiyzé stepped aside as Asobo-Ntsi stooped in front of Teneng with cupped hands, his back stiff.

'Tsa-apifor!' he whispered before straightening up, assisted. Then he spat into his palms three times, three symbolic jets of ancestral balm, rubbed them together and gently passed his hands over Teneng's face in caressing moves.

'Tsa-apifor!' he repeated. Then with a final effort he groped the dusty floor for a pebble to which he again applied three jets of spittle and showed it to his notables, including Cho-Muluh and Mbahnong who did the same, before he aimed it weakly at Teneng's chest, where the heart was lodged. Every stranger during a ritual ceremony strengthens the potency and Mbahnong knew this and was only too glad to share in the rare moment.

Ndiyzé pinched a bit of the camwood from the bundle in his

hand and applied it to Teneng's forehead, his chest and feet. Then he again placed his hand on the boy's forehead and gently pushed him backwards so that he tilted against Sa'amontoh's massive body before coming back to the rhythm of Ndiyzé's words.

'Nyen-Mechop,' he said, 'this is not my invention, nor is it that of Asobo-Ntsi. We are treading the path our fathers trod long before us, and shall continue to tread in times still to be born. We stand here as a bridge from what was and to that which is to come and therefore matter only in that connection. Even if times have changed as we now witness, it is not Nyen that has changed. All of Nyen is not here, but we cannot wait for everybody because Nyen does not change. Even so, the others will meet us on the way as we move on. This is the pride of Nyen, and while we wait on Nnkaa, we will move ahead.'

Then he paused and looked at Teneng as if he were seeing the boy for the first time. With the tip of his tongue he wriggled out three seeds of ndilingmeu which he had preserved under his tongue immediately he got out of bed and chewed rapidly; and as expected started spitting out the chaffy bits in a spray first against Teneng, the elders, the commoners, and in the direction of the closed door.

'Tsa-apifor,' he said bowing, 'Nyen greets you!'

Mafor gave a low, shrill ululation and did a dance at the same time in a stooped homage to Teneng who looked on in a stupefied manner as the woman rounded up her performance with another considerate ululation.

'Tsa-apifor!' she said straightening slightly, 'who ever said my father left me?'

One of the notables began humming the mandère rhythm and Asobo-Ntsi shook his head as his heart stirred to the sound of his song. He felt the blood again rushing through his veins and the mere sensation of the moment made him feel like swooning. He shook his head again and staggered back to his bed, as his men too stirred from their various spots, recalling and dreaming, and gathering courage against the impending tear hanging from the lashes of Nyen. There was no one to wipe it away, and they felt their misery echoed in the muffled sound of the mandère gong, rising and falling with the rhythm of their hearts like pregnant Qwang in the heart of Mengang, swollen as always beyond her banks and gathering herself along in the silent dignity of the mother fertilising the land that was hers. Who

could mistake the message of the gong, announcing the season of shaven heads for Nyen that should at last appease the Gods on behalf of the weary, the innocent and the guilty?

But Asobo-Ntsi coughed in a manner that made the men to slag in their steps of reverence and look at him.

‘Ndiyézé will bear us witness,’ he said, when the men were attentive, ‘that we did not forget the ways of the Gods, a long way from Nyen! No one consults the shrine of his ancestors when he knows the cause of the illness in his family. All we did was to seek a herb for Nyen because we were desperate and now, after this night, we can all sleep the sleep that our ancestors meant for us to sleep. But Nyen must not forget to appease the Gods and acknowledge our debt to them and give them their due when the right time comes for final rites. And Nyen should never sleep with both eyes closed...’

The men had gathered closer in their clogged clumsiness, and strained a bit to get the whispers from Asobo-Ntsi. He was making an effort to speak to them, his chest heaving violently and then calming as he forced out his words. Then he was seized by a fit of coughing and Mafor supported his head while he went through the paroxysm. He was breathing heavily now as Mafor wiped the tears from his eyes. It was clear that he could no longer find the strength to talk to them; they understood and in turn shook their heads with a bitterness that could not be described. For words had failed Asobo-Ntsi at last, the man who reigned in the dominion of words, uttered like thunder against the stubborn head, and then transformed into camwood for the wounded heart. But he was suddenly disconnected from speech and instead opened his mouth in a strange soundless manner and hoped that they understood his inability. He was flying away, they knew, and the following day Nwuoupang would only be seeing the sheath that had contained the manly voice of defiance. He had crossed the boundary of human utterances, as Mafor adjusted his head and smoothened out his wrinkled face, once more regaining its youthful brilliance simply because his eyes will not leave the naïve face of Teneng who was seated on the stool like a visitor not sure of where to sit.

Scott heard the gong sounds emanating from the prison area and

grimaced without feeling. He was now a hardened ball that only reacted to his instincts. The sounds elicited no emotions in him, even of anger, as would have been the case at another time. That was how he felt just when Asobo-Ntsi was transferred to the main cell. He thought the Fon was defying his authority by continuously beating his nocturnal rhythms in mournful notes that almost worked on his own stiff veins, Scott remarked. Then he chanced to stumble on one of his predecessors' papers and was overjoyed to read a section that significantly dealt with Accurate Eye-Witness Accounts of Native Rites in the Bamenda Highlands, before understanding the mode of delusion behind a faith that could no longer rescue its practitioners into assumed deification. It was on record then that in such tunes the native evoked the ancestral spirits to miraculously liberate them from enemy ways and render them invisible on their return passage home.

Scott smiled, wondering why the people have failed to learn that he was an impervious spirit, inscrutable to their invoked ancestry. How then were they not guilty of assisting him in their own subjugation when a conciliatory attitude from them would have softened him a bit? Whatever the case, he concluded, turning on his side and conjuring phrases for his report after the execution, they were probably unaware of the fact that their Gods have been dead a long time ago, if ever they existed, and all they had to do now was to submit to his and hope for whatever benevolence that could come from it.

Tamenji had spent the day in a restless mood, anxious, as he could never help it, whenever there was to be an execution. Those were moments when he found himself regretting his allegiance to Scott and all that the man represented for him. At first he thought the deep feeling of guilt would go away with time, but every time he had to go through the ordeal of preparation, he also knew he was going to spend weeks of remorse after that, asking himself questions to which he knew the answers would never come. If only Scott had not shifted everything onto his shoulders and in his sly way assumed only a ceremonial role! It was Tamenji who had to supervise in the erection of the scaffold, arrange for a coffin if it was an important case like Asobo-Ntsi, otherwise merely give instructions for a shallow grave to

be scratched out, and see to it that the victim is well 'prepared.' In the meantime he was the one, still, to contact the colonial medical officer and the other related personalities for any paper work. He had fallen in love with the word passage, which Scott used in reference to the meaning, Tamenji hoped, of the execution. It facilitated their movement from this sinful black world to that of white purity, which Scott of course represented. Tamenji hung onto his thoughts, wondering what will become of Asobo-Ntsi's soul after death since the Fon turned away Moundap, without giving the man even the least opportunity to convert him in preparation for the passage.

To make things worse he had sent back the whiskey offered him by Scott, a traditional sign of friendship, Scott maintained, that could never be severed even by death. No one had ever rebuffed a gift of the white man's like that, and when informed about the unruly behaviour, Scott merely shrugged as if he expected the reaction from that one, and went on sipping his tea from the small flower garden behind his house overlooking the vast emptiness of his undulating dominion. Nothing surprised him any more, from the recalcitrant fellow although he also admitted to himself that the rebuff was a huge question mark against his own authority.

Tamenji went about his work the whole day with a mindless perseverance, making contacts, giving instructions and rushing to Scott for updates: what was needed and what was to be altered, modified, submitting to his own frustration that gathered with intensity as the evening shadows began to fall; every vein in his agile body had been stretched to its limit and still he went on with the assignment, an automated being cast against the shadow of his faith. No execution on the hill had ever troubled him this much, not just because of the stature of the prisoner but also because of the shady manner in which the investigations had been conducted. He too was becoming penitent, without knowing why, and that was why he no longer hesitated whenever he received a request from Sa'amontoh for him to grant permission to go and 'see his people.' He understood what that meant and thought it too a form of final reconciliation with Asobo-Ntsi, if only the Fon could understand how he too felt.

The mandère sounds in the early hours of the morning came to him as he was reading a passage from his Holy Bible, in self-atonement to the impending task on his hands. Was he not a man of God who knew that even as the Lord had urged His people into war

so too was he engaged in a war that should ultimately show his people where to walk and how? It was not his war, he maintained, but that of his Lord and Saviour, and for which swords must be drawn even against kin and kith.

‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of the death...’ He read on, stumbling on some of the phrases, and wondering whether it was not sheer will that pushed him on, without reason? For the words were estranged from his concerns and fears then. But he read on, over and over, if only to pacify a guilt that demanded immediate ablution.

As he listened to his own voice coming from the depth of his cultured faith, Tamenji knew dawn was coming; he felt it in the sharp chilliness of the air filtering in through the chinks on his door and window. But he could not sleep; he was too weary for such luxury now, and pitied himself as he waited for dawn, suffering. If only Asobo-Ntsi knew, and felt the remorse he was going through in the service of that which was apparently inevitable! For, he was a man who had also surrendered everything to fate. He knew the judgement was supposed to have come in three days ago, but was ‘inevitably’ delayed in transit between Buea and Atisong. The state of the road, and attacks by hostile tribes along the way will be cited as reasons for its late arrival, especially with the persistent breakdown of the telegraph. Scott was to learn about the delay only later, when it would have been all over and impossible for possible amends, even delays, to be effected. But Tamenji had already received an elaborate message through a reliable native on what to do, to the letter. Asobo-Ntsi had no sympathisers in Buea, and when the anticipated contrary verdict to that of Buea finally came, their suspicions were confirmed. Lagos had rationalised on a matter that was purely unscientific, and called for the Chief to be released pending further investigations. Their argument, initialled by a series of ‘Considering that’ phrases, ended by stressing the fact that ‘in the absence of further incriminating evidence against the scientific administration of the drug, given that not all natives who consumed it perished, and that, consequently there may be some unproven logic with regards to its terrible efficacy the little puzzle warranted more insight.’

‘... I fear no evil, for Thou art with me’.

The prison population with a few individuals from the scattered hamlets around were already seated on the gentle slope that overlooked the execution grounds. Their conversation was in low tones so that their voices rumbled on the morning breeze like low thunder, as they cast furtive looks all around when there was a clash of cymbals from the prison band, to announce the arrival of the officials, who in any case, were not many. Just the few colonial workers, briskly dressed but wearing strained looks as of doubt and guilt on their faces, and only too anxious for the ceremony to be over, occupied the front seats.

The prison priest came in, a short stunted fellow with a sagging chin, and mumbled a sermon about the joy to know and praise famous men by whose example the joy of redemption is furthered. In a tenuous voice he called on all to rejoice for the opportunity offered by the Saviour for such eternal hope. He was visibly happy to be through with his task, his face relaxed all of a sudden, and as he retired in short quick steps, clutching the bible like a piece of treasure, the band took up and blasted 'God Save the King.' Scott looked miserable at attention, watching the flag as it crawled up the pole in fluttering pride. In a flash he recalled his oath of allegiance to his King and Country, and as he watched that symbol of his patriotism being pulled skyward, he refused to acknowledge what may only be a presumption in determining the health of that imperial vision that was clearly defined by his own eyes. He screwed them up into squinting pebbles, as strong as his faith, and was no longer in doubt as to the purpose of his mission on this hilly enclave. He flipped the pebbles closed as the patriotic song came to an end with a fantastic clash of cymbals, and felt the usual sensation of belonging and of being alive, run through him, a feeling of pride that fed and led both the willing and unwilling, convincing them in the end of its own convictions.

As he went back to his seat, Asobo-Ntsi was brought out of the shed that had been prepared for his final rest before the necessary act, and led to the scaffold some ten yards from where Scott was sitting. Scott himself was shocked to see how fast the man had

depreciated, his emaciated limbs showing through the loose folds of his ntum and dangling along in a reluctant drag escorted by two guards. Then what Scott had dreaded all along happened. As he was being led across the yard, Asobo-Ntsi mustered his last strength and paused briefly and cast a penetrating look at Scott that went through the man like a burning sword. It was a brief occurrence, so brief the guards took it for a stumbling inconvenience in the Fon's walk, before pulling him on. But it was the last unworded dialogue between the former friends and Scott knew that he would take that grim look of woe on the face of Asobo-Ntsi to his own grave when the time shall come. The unshaven face was haggard in its despise of his presence, defiant as always, and Scott was certain that he was almost smiling at the inability to master his stubbornness. Scott trembled inside and quickly looked around, afraid that someone should notice the exchange between him and Asobo-Ntsi.

The charges were read out in English and interpreted in Mungakaa and Asobo-Ntsi looked on with superior impatience. He was clearly unrepentant, a sinner right to the end, the pastor observed from his own corner where he was squeezed between a guard and a white man. It was Asobo-Ntsi's moment of supremacy that generations shall live to tell and re-tell, how he challenged Nwuoupang to combat and refused to submit! Scott saw it written all over the wrinkled, bushy face. And Ndiyzé felt it too, like the rest of the Nyen notables herded in fear and wonder, the furious pride of Asobo-Ntsi exposing itself in a curious moment of doubt. But it was what he seemed to have desired all his life, this supreme confrontation with a force he could wrestle with and not give in, even if broken.

'Do you have anything to say?' the messenger said in a quivering voice.

But Asobo-Ntsi looked on, tight-lipped and almost impatient, impermeable to the verbal enticement.

Embarrassed, the messenger rushed through the rest of the ritual with mechanical precision, and ended up in a preachy eloquence, his voice regaining its equanimity, of the lessons to be drawn from the passing away of Asobo-Ntsi.

As he was about to be led away onto the planks, he raised his clenched fist in a final salutation, weakly gestured as if in the heat of a mbaghelem jig, to his people gathered in a group on the lower rung

of the tiered place. Never expecting such boldness, the men were taken aback, not knowing how to react. They were scared of Nwuoupang and his men, and so failed to return the final greetings of Asobo-Ntsi; he did not expect them to greet back, though. Then he was blindfolded, his hands tied behind him. With military precision, the well-knotted cord was lowered onto his neck, adjusted with the air of a casual performance. The men stepped off the platform and the priest sauntered forward reluctantly from his new retreat for a final prayer, committing the uncreated soul of Asobo-Ntsi into the hands of the Lord, renewed, and born again in a final submission to the divine powers of enlightenment. The 'Amen!' was barely out of his mouth when in a flash the platform gave way and Asobo-Ntsi disappeared from view. The monstrous cord, hanging from the huge poles of eucalyptus, dangled violently with jerks that could easily have snapped the cord if the texture was otherwise. Then it seemed all was silent when the rope was given another tug, and repeated successively like fitful eddies after a tropical rain storm, Scott thought fearfully. There was subdued whimpering on the knoll, as the men watched, baffled by this unique spectacle of civilisation, when suddenly it was all over. After weaker, intermittent tremblings, the cord finally settled into a calm stiffness like a very long sword into the heart of man, the crucifix that should reclaim humanity from dark by-ways into the fold of civilised certainty.

These thoughts rushed through Scott's mind, pushed into conclusion by the unexpected shock he was experiencing, almost trembling, and already scripting the conclusion to his report in his mind, as he rushed off from the execution grounds without usual ceremony. He did not have to bother himself with giving instructions anymore; his men would do as they thought fit, since in any case, everything must be tidied up one way or another on this black Golgotha. The one desire of his heart then was a shot of Johnnie Walker Whisky, to quench the burning dread like a stench of civilisation, and cleanse his disturbed spirit. So he rushed off blocking out the alien sounds that were once again threatening his convictions, to insulate himself in the safety of his room, and meditate about the trauma of being a messiah among a stiff, angry people he had forced himself to love.

Aftermath

And little did he know that after so many seasons of lonely guilt, when he could not wave back to his Fon and feel the expiring warmth like the curling smoke from the pipe that had bonded them together through fair and treacherous weather, he could still find respite from memory, his own dreaded thoughts: how was he, Cho-Muluh, not to feel reprieved at last that the burden was now food for posterity, and his no more to bear? From the little boy with a running nose he was now grey memory, and even then, one in need of wings for his flight into the ancestral cove where incense gave eternal bliss to the laboured flesh.

His fitful heaves of breathing that summoned sleep by rejecting it reached Tella'a who was suddenly aware of his own pregnancy in weaves of lore. He was being weaned into the oracle head and although he felt inexplicable fear ripping his heart apart, he also knew that distortions in the tale of a people can never be rectified by a stranger. It had taken only a few hours for him to wander and be led through the atavistic jungle and emerge on a new horizon of his people, and new knowledge of what he did not know at the start of the evening was a great relieve.

Still, he knew that there were power blocs that had solidified their own stories since the confusion that gripped his people in the protracted aftermath of Asobo-Ntsi's demise. The makers of history also weave their own contingent myths whether of manhood or cowardice, and mankind is left to blunder on in confusion, always, sorting out the confusion in relative scrutiny. Scrub out what is unwanted and reconstruct from a Precambrian nerve – that was part of the challenge ahead; and he bathed in fearful acknowledgement.

But that was also too much humbug for his heavy eyelids, with the cocks already calling forth the morning rays. As he slumped back against the brick wall he thought he heard a whispery farewell and in the old man's blurred vision saw a hand weakly waving a farewell from a distance. He struggled to look, fearful of a previous inability, but only felt his whispery presence like a revelation, fading like a dusk. It had been a prolonged farewell and he wondered at the

sudden bridging of their lives in that room with cracked, unpalstered walls showing gaping spaces where the bricks met and through which the wind had wheezed all night. Those walls were their only witness apart from the old man's sister who had been coughing intermittently through the night in her own room with an unrolled mat door. But it seemed too, all of a sudden, that Tella'a was experiencing a new birth, like knowledge divined from the untrodden ways of his being. Calmness descended upon him, like unknown fear, and in that instance, as his eyes itched and cried for sleep, he understood why the civilisation of which he was a victim, had to be in parentheses.

Somewhere a cock crowed and the voice ceased to be.

And it was a new day?

“Mbuh’s novel exposes the reader to another new voice to the mould of writers who find the issue of (re) tracing who they are, where they come from and where they are going as a veritable necessity to fit into our contemporary times that is so complexly structured....

A most compelling read.”

Kelvin Ngong Toh, PhD Department of English
University of Buea, Cameroon

This novel re-visions history through narrative fiction: the history of his people that has long been silenced and distorted as a colonial strategy, the history of an African community at the crossroads. Asobo-Ntsi, the stubborn yet proud Fon of Nyen, is faced with some challenges amongst which are: his seven- and nine-man council that is not happy with his dictatorship and tax laws, a disgruntled quarter that attempts to secede, and also, the encroaching colonialist, Nwuoupang, with his church and administration. How Asobo-Ntsi handles these challenges is expressed powerfully and movingly with great narrative artistry that absorbs the reader and keeps him/her enthralled to the end.

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